

PEACEBUILDING THROUGH INTERRELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS
WORLD: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS AND PEDAGOGIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS
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ABSTRACT

Peacebuilding through Interreligious Education in a Multi-Religious World: Theological Reflections and Pedagogies of Interreligious Education

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Promoting interreligious education in the religious community can help build peace and harmony in the nation. Interreligious education not only promotes an understanding of other religions, but it also promotes an understanding of different religious people within the society. This dissertation defends the importance of decolonizing interreligious theology and interreligious education for peacebuilding in a multi-religious community. Based on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, this dissertation proposes various peace initiatives in interreligious engagement. It also examines why interreligious theology is essential for interreligious education and how interreligious theology can help promote interreligious education. The theological research methodology is applied while critically analyzing a theology of religious pluralism as the only approach that seeks for a better and harmonious society of religious diversity and interreligious theology as a prerequisite for interreligious education. Drawing from the history and religious education of Myanmar people, this study decolonizes practices and pedagogies of interreligious education in classroom settings and in the community for the purpose of peacebuilding in a multi-religious world.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, who have raised me and encouraged me to be strong that I become the first Lisu woman who earned a Ph.D. degree in the United States. I also dedicate this research to my former seminary, Myanmar Institute of Theology, where I first learned about Interreligious Education, and professor Dr. Saw Hlaing Bwa, who helped me open my spiritual eyes to see how vital interreligious education is for our current society.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Promoting interreligious education in the religious community can help build peace and harmony in the nation. Interreligious education not only promotes an understanding of other religions, but it also promotes an understanding of different religious people within the society. Myanmar is composed of many different religious groups, and so religious diversity is not a new thing, but several decades of the oppressive political system of Myanmar military government has resulted in civil wars and hatred among the different religious groups. Buddhists are the majority and most privileged religious group in the country. Ethnic minorities who belong to other religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism do not get equal rights, not only in their ability to practice their religious traditions, but also in other privileges including getting promotion in government services and military service. Perry Schmidt-Leukel says that religions are frequently used to create and increase conflicts in a society, which are basically rooted in nonreligious causes and motives.¹ In most political conflicts between the majority and minority in Myanmar, religions have been used as the instrument to cause conflicts so that the military can sustain their political power.

In this chapter, I introduce my dissertation's purpose, background, methodologies, and limitation. My research question is: How interreligious education can be designed to help promote peacebuilding and heal generational pain and mistrust in a multi-religious world and what would the effects of this education look like on the ground? I would like to base my research on the Myanmar religious context and religious conflicts. However, the application is

¹ Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures—An Extended Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), chapter 1, EBSCOhost.

not limited to Myanmar alone, but also for a larger multi-religious community. This dissertation will basically emphasize building peace for a nation through religious pathways, but with the understanding that it is impossible to achieve peace only through religious matters. Most conflicts in our present world society are associated with political, economic, and/or ethical causes. For instance, there are many other causes for conflicts in Myanmar such as politics, ethnic prejudices, natural resource scarcity, land distribution, and economic disparities. Dealing with only religious matter is not enough to build peace within a nation, but healing religious tensions would be a large step toward peace. This dissertation is limited to the interfaith efforts focus on two main religions: Christianity and Buddhism, but there are other interfaith relations that could be explored, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. In Myanmar, Buddhism is the central religion that minority religions like Christianity are forced to directly interact with. Christians have lived side by side with their Buddhists neighbors for centuries without genuinely encountering with one another. The lack of genuine encounters has contributed to the long-standing internal conflicts between different religions especially between Buddhists and minority religions.

The purpose of interreligious education is to educate people about different faith traditions because religious illiteracy is one of the reasons for religious conflicts in a community. According to Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, “Lack of religious literacy is alarming,” even among Americans who are living in one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world.² She further stresses that “the need for critical religious literacy demands the examination of the content and pedagogy of all religious efforts.”³ This dissertation argues that interreligious

² Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, “Interreligious Learning,” *Religious Education* 110, no. 5 (October-December 2015): 484.

³ Kujawa-Holbrook, “Interreligious Learning,” 484.

education must go beyond religious literacy in order to build peace, good relationships, and a better society among people of different faiths. There are theologians like Jay McDaniel who works on learning from other religions as a path to peace. Religious literacy alone is not sufficient to build peace in a nation. Religious education today needs to go beyond learning about other religions to active engagement with other religious traditions. But interreligious encounters alone do not help build peace either. Beyond religious literacy and interreligious encounters, the world's religions should, as McDaniel challenges in *Gandhi's Hope*, live compassionately, self-critically, simply, and ecologically and should welcome religious diversity.⁴

Myanmar is comprised of more than 163 ethnic groups and several different religions; Buddhism is the majority. The country had been under a military government for 50 years from 1962 until 2010. In 2010, the military government reformed their political system into democratic system but was still a military-backed government based on the 2008 constitution which was prepared by the military. The reforms in 2010 included releasing some political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi of the National League of Democracy, who were in opposition to military rule. In 2015, the National League of Democracy, won landslide election. Even after this however, people of Myanmar did not experience full democracy because the 2008 constitution was still a roadmap for the country and there were still 25 percent active military representatives in the parliament. In 2020, the National League of Democracy party again won a landslide election, but before the new elected government began their term, the military junta detained the State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, the President U Win Myint, and many political

⁴ Jay McDaniel, *Gandhi's Hope: Learning from Other Religions as a Path to Peace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 71.

leaders, violently overthrowing the people's elected government. Currently, there is a historic revolutionary people's movement going on throughout the country. There are massive protests against the military junta by various means such as the Civil Disobedience Movement, protests, boycotts, civil wars, etc.

There were many hidden conflicts among religions and ethnic groups which were suppressed under the military regime. Those conflicts started to explode after the new (democratic) government system began in 2010. Due to the rise in religious conflicts across Myanmar, the role of religious leaders has become even more important and interreligious education has become of increasing interest to religious leaders. Places such as the Myanmar Institute of Theology, Buddhist University, Islamic Center and some NGOs have started giving interreligious education and initiating interfaith movements among their people.

Interreligious education seeks to articulate the uniqueness of each religious tradition and at the same time value religious pluralism. Most Christians in Myanmar are conservative in terms of their beliefs. They have a spiritual superiority complex, maintaining that Christianity is the only religion which will lead them to heaven. They are more concerned about life after death than this present life and this concept has kept Christianity away from other religions, especially Buddhism. Likewise, Buddhists have their own form of religious biases over other minority religions in Myanmar, saying that all other religions are colonial religions. All of this has made the theology of religious pluralism a basic need for Myanmar Christians and other religions as well.

Religious leaders and educators today must integrate interreligious education in their respective education system because a lack of interreligious education can – and does – cause conflicts in a community. Religious communities play an important role in fostering justice and

peace in societies as religious beliefs can form an inspirational basis for peacebuilding. This further highlights why dialogue among religious groups is necessary to build peace in a country. For this dissertation, I will be using interdisciplinary method as the field of interreligious education is interdisciplinary in nature. I will investigate some related multi-disciplinary areas such as educational theories and pedagogies, peace education, interreligious theology, and religious pluralism.

This dissertation also engages with the method of intersectionality as an analytic tool because intersectionality “is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences.”⁵ By using intersectional theology and practical theology, I will decolonize practices of interreligious education as peacebuilding for the multi-religious world. The phenomenological research method will be used to analyze the religious experiences of the people in Myanmar and their religious education to interreligious education.

In Chapter 2, I discuss Interreligious Education as a kind of Peace Education or Interreligious Engagement as Peace Initiatives. In this chapter, I will investigate what roles religious education can play in the peace education efforts and what interreligious engagements areas to peacebuilding in a society. I propose that every peace initiative practice must be interreligious because peace is the foundation and the sole purpose of every religion. Peace and love toward others is the message and the heart of every religion. Various peace initiatives in interreligious engagement are discussed which will include interreligious dialogue, interfaith just peacemaking, positive peacemaking, and the non-violence movement.

Religious education matters for peacebuilding in a nation because most violence in the world today has root causes in religion. Eunice Karanja Kamaara states that, “although all world

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), ProQuest Ebook Central, chapter 1.

religions claim to uphold peace and justice, they are heavily associated with conflict and violence.”⁶ The question for chapter 2 is what kind of pedagogy will be more effective in peacebuilding while developing interreligious education as peacebuilding.

Dialogue is the primary methodology for interreligious education and peace education. Four forms of interreligious dialogue by Paul Hedges are discussed in this chapter 2: the dialogue of theological exchange, the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, and the dialogue of religious experience.⁷ In the context of Myanmar, the goal of interreligious dialogue is to remove long-standing feelings and misconceptions that people from different religious traditions have toward one another. In the book *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, Mohammed Abu-Nimer says that “dialogue is a path that is full of positive and constructive joint energy and that is based on creativity and trust.”⁸ Dorothea M. Filus states that “through the interreligious dialogue, Christians are getting rid of their superiority complex, gaining respect for other religions and realizing that Christianity is not the only true religion.”⁹ As mentioned in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, religious dialogue is important for negotiation, reconciliation, and apology which are essential for peacebuilding. Many theologians have contributed to many different methods and strategies for interreligious dialogue.

⁶ Eunice Karanja Kamaara, “The Role of Inter-religious Education in Fostering Peace and Development,” in *International Handbook of Inter-religious Education*, ed. Kath Engerbretson et al. (New York: Springer, 2010), 659.

⁷ Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 60, 61.

⁸ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “The Miracles of Transformation through Interfaith Dialogue: Are You a Believer?,” in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, ed. David R. Smock (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002), 16.

⁹ Dorothea M. Filus, “Interreligious Education and Dialogue in Japan,” in Engerbretson et al., *International Handbook*, 800.

Interreligious education and peace education go hand in hand in the multi-religious society. Interfaith just peacemaking is important to peacebuilding for a multi-religious nation. Many people have done work on Interfaith peacemaking. In this chapter, I focus particularly on Glen Stassen's *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives and Peace, Just Peacemaking as the New Ethic for Peace and War* edited by Glen Stassen, James Burke, John Langan, Pamela Brubaker, and Duane Friesen, and Eboo Patel's *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action. Trauma healing is a part of interfaith just peacemaking*. I also draw from the works of Asian theologians such as Kwok Pui-lan, Peter Phan, and Raimon Panikkar, and some Myanmar theologians in comparison to Western theologians.

Glen Stassen identified seven steps of peacemaking in *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace*: (1) affirm common security, (2) take independent initiatives, (3) talk with your enemy, (4) seek human rights and justice, (5) acknowledge vicious cycles: participate in the peacemaking process, (6) end judgmental propaganda, make amends, and (7) work with citizens' groups for the truth.¹⁰ In later years, Glen Stassen, James Burke, John Langan, Pamela Brubaker, and Duane Friesen, in their introduction to *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, described three theological imperatives of peacemaking: initiatives, justice, and love and community.¹¹ Under these three convictions, there are ten essential practices of peacemaking. These ten practices of peacemaking were adopted as chapter titles in *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War*: (1) support nonviolent direct action, (2) take independent

¹⁰ Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 89,90 .

¹¹ Pamela Brubaker et al., "Introduction: Just Peacemaking as the New Ethic for Peace and War, in *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, new ed., ed. Glen H. Stassen (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 18,19.

initiatives to reduce threat, (3) use cooperative conflict resolution, (4) acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness, (5) advance democracy, human rights, and interdependence, (6) foster just and sustainable economic development, (7) work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system, (8) strengthen the united nations international efforts for cooperation and human rights, (9) reduce offensive weapons and the weapons trade, and (10) encourage grassroots peacemaking groups.¹²

Nonviolent action is another important element for a positive peacemaking process. Non-violence is the only way to attain positive peace in the nation. Works on nonviolence include *Inter Active Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community Building Handbook* edited by Bud Heckman, David P. Barash's *Approaches to Peace: A Reader in Peace Studies*. Andrew Fitz-Gibbon, *Positive Peace: Reflections on Peace Education, Nonviolence, and Social Change*. Arun Gandhi, in the guest foreword to *Positive Peace*, says that "in the culture of nonviolence, all human beings, and by extension all nations are interlinked, interconnected, and interrelated."¹³

Chapter 3 focuses on Interreligious Learning and Education. Interreligious Education is by nature ongoing education which must be structured appropriately to achieve the goals of interreligious education. In this chapter, I revisit educational philosophies and theories of philosophers such as Alfred N. Whitehead, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire. I believe their educational theories should serve as the basic foundation of all kinds of education including interreligious education. I also integrate critical race theory (CRT) with interreligious education

¹² Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, ed., *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹³ Arun Gandhi, guest foreword to *Positive Peace: Reflections on Peace Education, Nonviolence, and Social Change*, ed. Andrew Fitz-Gibbon (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), xx.

based on Freire's critical theory because CRT is not only limited to applying in racial discrimination, but also to various other forms of discrimination in education.

Furthermore, interreligious education is by its nature interdisciplinary and therefore, I will be investigating various disciplines relating to interreligious learning based on already founded educational theories. Multi-religious learning, critical theory, intersectionality, and spirituality are analyzed in relation to interreligious learning. Multi-religious learning is important for religious literacy, but for the purpose of building peace in the multi-religious society, our learning should go beyond multi-religious learning to interreligious learning which "aims at developing the competencies needed to engage religious diversity."¹⁴ Critical theory for interreligious education is based on the philosophy of Paulo Freire. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, considered one of the classical texts of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire makes it clear what defines critical thinking. As Henry A. Giroux puts it in his analysis of Freire's critical pedagogy:

Critical thinking for Freire was not an object lesson in test-taking, but a tool for self-determination and civic engagement. According to Freire, critical thinking was not about the task of simply reproducing the past and understanding the present. To the contrary, it was about offering a way of thinking beyond the present, soaring beyond the immediate confines of one's experiences, entering into a critical dialogue with history, and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present.¹⁵

Critical thinking is vitally important in interreligious dialogue and the effort to build peace in communities because it helps us identify and understand problems and come up with the best solution. Based on Freire's critical pedagogy, I go on to some practices for interreligious

¹⁴ Marianne Moyaert, "On the Role of Ritual in Interfaith Education," *Religious Education* 113, no. 1 (2008): 52.

¹⁵ Henry A. Giroux, "Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom: Paulo Freire and the Promise of Critical Pedagogy," *Policy Futures in Education* 8, no. 6 (2010): 716, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.6.715>.

education in the next chapter to use in different settings such as classroom, community, and social activism. He provides clear perspective of critical theory for education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. His idea of “conscientization” was well supported by educators such as Judith Berling and bell hooks.

Intersectionality in religious education has become an important subject because everyone experiences social power differently based on their own social context. Intersectionality explains how social divisions of race, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others, position people differently in the world and is now widely considered in interreligious education by interreligious educators such as Najeeba Syeed and Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook. Intersectionality helps see the systemic inequalities in the traditional learning methods and traces the missing gaps.

Spirituality is another important discipline in interreligious education because interreligious learning is always spiritual and sacred as it involves spiritual experiences of every religion. Kujawa-Holbrook in *God Beyond Borders*, Elizabeth Liebert in *Changing Life Patterns*, and Duane Bidwell in *When One Religion Isn't Enough* stress on the importance of one's spirituality through participating in different religious traditions. Peter Phan in *Being Religious Interreligiously* portrays the Asian spirituality only by being religiously pluralistic.

Chapter 4 is Pedagogies and Practices for Interreligious Education in which I analyze the work of interreligious educators especially Judith Berling, and bell hooks. After analyzing previous Interreligious Education learning models of some religious educators, I decolonize interreligious education and propose several Pedagogies and Practices of Interreligious Education for Myanmar religious community. My method for this chapter is the Freirean critical pedagogy, which is relatively rooted in the critical race theory with the IRE. Along with Freire's

critical approach and critical race theory for education, I will use educational teaching methods for the pedagogies of interreligious education for peacebuilding in the multi-religious society.

Chapter 4 has three sections: Pedagogies for IRE, Strategies and Practices for IRE, and IRE in three settings. My method for this chapter is applying decolonial thinking to interreligious education methods and strategies for our own context. Previous interreligious learning models provided by some religious educators such as Judith Berling, bell hook, Oddbjørn Leirvik, and Rebecca Kratz Mays are discussed and applied to Myanmar's context. Specifically, I draw on Judith Berling's *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education*, Rebecca Kratz Mays' *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots*, Oddbjørn Leirvik's *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* and *Shared Learning in a Plural World: Ecumenical Approaches to Inter-Religious Education* edited by Gert Ruppell and Peter Schreiner.

As an Asian feminist theologian, Kwok Pui-lan uses the critical theory to apply feminist and postcolonial theory in her examining the relationship between epistemology and social change for the contemporary world. Pui-Lan's *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding* and *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* are good examples of intersecting feminist theology and postcolonial thought to the Asian biblical interpretation and theological world. Kwok-Pui-Lan's *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis* provides pedagogies for bringing questions of power, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality into the classroom to promote students' global consciousness and their leadership skills. It is important for religious educators to educate students with religious transnational literacy because "theology

grows out from lived experience and a particular context.”¹⁶ It is vital for teachers to recognize that every student is unique, coming from a diverse range of backgrounds, and therefore should give credit to students for their different experiences. In the 21st century, we cannot ignore racial and ethnic minority experiences in the classroom like in a traditional and Eurocentric theology class. In a global perspective, the experiences of religious and ethnic minority students become “authentic” for their cultures and therefore, it is also important for teachers to prepare “the power dynamic shaping in the class and offer guidelines.”¹⁷

The need for today’s interreligious education is emphasized in Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s work on decolonizing methodologies in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* especially, her approach of cultural competency. Like Smith, some Myanmar local theologians such as Saw Hlaing Bwa, Samuel Ngun Ling, and Simon Pau Khan En have contributed contextual and theological practices to interreligious education in Myanmar.

The educational paradigm shift from monologue-education to dialogue-education is key for the learning style. Teaching methods by Judith Berling will be vital for interreligious education. Based on Berling’s work, several pedagogies for interreligious education will be used especially for classroom setting in this chapter 4: boundary-crossing, engaged dialogical, mutual learning, and student-centered learning. In the community level beyond the classroom setting, social activities will be created after finding common grounds for all religious people. Scholars in the field of interreligious education and peacemaking such as Sheryl Kujawal-Holbrook, David Smock, and Eboo Patal have provided many important social activities for peacebuilding.

¹⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, “Teaching Theology from a Global Perspective,” in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan, Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, and Dwight N. Hopkins (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015), 25.

¹⁷ Kwok, “Teaching Theology,” 26.

Hook's Engaged Pedagogy is one of the most important learning needed for community peace building in my country. The most significant learning method I learned at CST is learning from everyone -- not only from teacher, but also from my classmates. In Burmese culture, students and children are to be quiet and obedient before their parents and teachers. This culture has disfigured the development of learning system. There is no spirit of learning together. Students have to only listen to what teachers teach and memorize all the lessons to pass examinations. According to Judith A. Berling, "the creation of this learning community requires bringing students into active conversation, empowering them to speak, but also teaching them to listen to one another."¹⁸ Hook's Engaged Pedagogy seeks, "to include all of the voices and perspectives in the classroom."¹⁹ Students come from different social and religious background and therefore, they all have different experiences. Letting them to speak out in the class will make them have more confident and allow them learn from each other.

Interreligious education is important not only in religious institutions, but at all levels of education. Starting this education from childhood is a great beneficial for the society. Christian Religious education in my country has taught parents to teach their children the doctrine of Christianity, which focuses on salvation only through Christianity, preventing them from learning about any other religions. When teaching interreligious education in schools, using inclusive language and resources plays a very important role. Schools should offer a space for dialogue between students regardless of their religions. One of the major problems students from other religions in Myanmar face is using Buddhism as the only way to pray. In most government schools, students and teachers have to recite Buddhist prayers. They celebrate all Buddhists

¹⁸ Judith A. Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 25.

¹⁹ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 25.

festivals in the schools, but not those of other religions. This makes students and teachers from other religions uncomfortable and feel excluded. This exclusion creates a distinction between who is “in-group and out-group,”²⁰ further exacerbating religious conflict in the society.

It is not right to address one’s fear of losing their religious identity and defend one’s own faith by excluding other religions. According to Berling, “The goal of Christian theological learning is Christian identity, in the sense that theological learning intends to deepen the learner’s sense of Christian tradition and how to embody that tradition in the present realities,” which is “the relationship of Christians to adhere of other religions.”²¹ Learning about various religious rituals, doctrines and practices does not lead to the loss of one’s religious identity. To the contrary, learning the core spirituality of different religions definitely has benefit for one’s own spiritual life as well as for better relationships within and among religions. Interreligious conflicts can be solved when we understand the real essence of our own religions and beliefs.

Chapter 5 is Theological Reflection for Interreligious Education. Interreligious Theology is a Prerequisite for Interreligious Education. This chapter examines why interreligious theology is important for interreligious education and how interreligious theology can help promote interreligious education. The chapter includes investigating where our religious belief systems have caused harm to ourselves and people of other religions, leading to religious conflicts and violence among us. Theological research methodology will be applied while critically analyzing the theology of religious pluralism as the only approach that seeks for “positive assessment of religious diversity”²² and interreligious theology as a prerequisite for interreligious education.

²⁰ John F. Dovidio, Samuel L. Gaertner, and Marika J. Lamoreaux, “Leadership Across Group Divides: The Challenges and Potential of Common Group Identity,” in *Crossing the Divide: Intergroup Leadership in a World of Difference*, ed. Todd L. Pittinsky (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 5.

²¹ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 71.

²² Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 1.

Religious diversity undeniably exists in every society. As religious plurality spreads to every community due to global migration, interreligious education becomes an important objective in the education system to build peace and harmony amid religious diversity.

The theology of religious pluralism as I understand it is theological incentive to accept co-existence among religions and to create a harmonious society by respecting the differences among religions. As the world is getting localized through rapid globalization, we cannot deny and reject religious pluralism. Every religion is challenged to contribute to efforts to build peace, justice, and dignity, not only among people but also with the whole ecological environment. The theology of religious pluralism is a critical tool for fixing the broken relationship of human society through constructive interreligious dialogue. Interreligious theology deals with “interreligious reflection on different understandings of religious diversity and their possible compatibility.”²³ And “interreligious theology implies that religion may learn from their differences.”²⁴ Therefore, Interreligious theology will become an important need for interreligious education. Perry states interreligious theology responds to the fact that every society in the world is undergoing an unstoppable religious diversity.

In Kwok Pui-Lan’s and Joerge Rieger’s book *Occupy Religion*, they argue that everyone in a religious community is important and that religious leaders and educators should be present to, and seek the input from the people they serve. In light of understanding the mistakes of traditional top-down leadership, which can easily become self-absorbed, teaching pedagogies used in the interreligious education must be reconsidered and reformulated based on the context. Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan discuss the theology of multitude in *Occupy Religion*. In their view,

²³ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 8.

²⁴ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 8.

the multitude is understood as “a political subject with social consciousness that has the power to shape its destiny and change the world” and also is “the political object in the making” that is shaped by explicit “practices and concrete actions.”²⁵ Just as the theology of the multitude is concerned for common human issues like global warming, interreligious theology is doing theology which “reflects on the major issues of human life by drawing on insights from more than one religious tradition.”²⁶ Here, the theologies of Paul Knitter and Marjorie Suchocki are useful. Paul Knitter’s religious pluralism advocates for the common good of all people.²⁷ He thinks of practical issues of human suffering and the earth. Suchocki talks about building friendships with all people regardless of religion as God’s mission.²⁸

Classical Christian theologies that hinder religious pluralism will be criticized constructively and comparatively in Chapter 5. There are three primary approaches used when discussing diversity within the theologies of religion: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Among them, religious pluralism is the only approach that encourages interreligious education. These three approaches will be discussed in relation to three models of religious education: mono, multi, and inter-religious education. In this chapter, the theological research method, comparative theology, and process thinking approaches by theologians such as John B. Cobb, David Ray Griffin, Jay McDaniel, Paul Knitter, and Roland Faber will be used.

²⁵ Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of The Multitude* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 29.

²⁶ Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 29.

²⁷ Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

²⁸ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 109.

There is a close interconnection between religious pluralism and interreligious education. Understanding religious pluralism is the key to build genuine interreligious education because interreligious education by definition engages with religious diversity. There are many forms of religious pluralism. In this dissertation, I will examine John Hick's pluralism, in which the end goal of all religions is to reach the Ultimate or the Real, in comparison to "deep pluralism" or "complementary pluralism" which is used by John Cobb and other process theologians. In *The Problem of Religious Pluralism*, John Hick argues that religious pluralism deals with "the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness [which is] taking place in different ways within the context of all the great religious traditions."²⁹ He affirms that these diverse interpretations of different religious experiences are responses to a single ultimate reality which he calls "the Real."

David Ray Griffin's *Deep Religious Pluralism* expresses at least three ultimate and these three are present in some form in every religion. However, different religions tend to stress one ultimate over others. Complementary pluralism avoids criticism of conflating religions that are different from each other. These differences actually complement each other. Complementary pluralism is helpful in promoting interreligious theology in ways that will encourage interreligious education. Jay McDaniel also talks about the heart of complementary pluralism which for him is, "the assumption that there is more wisdom in all the religions taken together than in any of them considered alone, and that people of different religions have much to learn from each other, because insights from one religion help complete and correct insights from the others."³⁰

²⁹ John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 34.

³⁰ McDaniel, *Gandhi's Hope*, 9.

Based on the basic idea of complementary pluralism, bridging the gap between Christians and Buddhists through establishing common ground, including public concerns such as trauma healing, human rights movement, civil society development, and capacity building for young people, is an important work for this chapter. The work of Peter Phan, in his book *Being Religious Interreligiously*, portrays how theology today should encompass intellectual, interpersonal, and cross-cultural elements with a commitment to social justice and liberation of the oppressed. Along with Peter Phan's work, Pui-Lan Kwok's work on postcolonial imagination and Asian theology will be used to examine the weakness of colonialism, oppression, and religious conflicts in the cultural context of Myanmar, a multi-religious country. Myanmar theologians such as Hlaing Bwa, Samuel Ngun Ling, and Simon Pau Khan En, have criticized the colonial mindset of Western Christian missionaries and have contributed contextual theologies based on liberation theologies for Myanmar people which includes interreligious theology.

Chapter 2

Interreligious Education as a Kind of Peace Education: Interreligious Engagement as Peace Initiative

Introduction

Interreligious education and peace education go hand in hand in the multi-religious society. They cannot be separated because many conflicts in the multi-religious society are closely related to religions. In this chapter, I propose that every peace initiative practice must be interreligious because peace is the foundation and the sole purpose of every religion – peace and love toward others is the core message all religions try to teach their followers. Thus, interreligious education is a means to peacebuilding within a nation. There are many interreligious engagements we can conduct as peace initiatives. In this chapter, the following engagements will be discussed: Interreligious Dialogue, Interfaith Just Peacemaking, and the Non-violence Movement.

Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is a primary methodology for interreligious education and peace education. Dialogue is a way to build an interreligious learning environment. Heckman defines dialogue as interaction between persons of different viewpoints such as conversation, sharing meals and experience, creating arts, and participating in a religious observance.¹ Similarly, McKenzie Flowers Fergus defines dialogue as “an exchange of information or a conversation where two participants seek to positively engage in a constructive and respectful exchange of

¹ Bud Heckman and Rori Picker Neiss, “Interfaith Dialogue: What Is It and Why Is It Important?,” in *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook*, ed. Bud Heckman, with Rori Picker Neiss (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2008), 5.

ideas with another person.”² Fergus further describes interreligious dialogue as a form of “logical discourse in an open-minded and honest discussion where an individual approaches communication with an inquisitive disposition seeking to both observe and learn about religious beliefs, traditions, and practices.”³

Interreligious dialogue is key to peacemaking among different religions as it brings about mutual understandings and the development of deep relationships. According to Sergey Melnik, interreligious dialogue is essential in the task of “exploring a complex of problems pertaining to the establishment of positive relationships between followers of different religion” in this interdependent and interrelated world.⁴ Dialogue is vital for the community where religion is a sensitive issue because it helps “to identify common concerns and promote the building of wider human community.”⁵ Tension among religions rises when dialogue is neglected, Myanmar being a primary example. The increase of conflict and tension among different religions in the world today demands the urgency of interreligious dialogue as a peacebuilding process. The concept of interreligious dialogue is still new to most Myanmar Christians, especially among the grassroots levels. Many Christians understand interreligious dialogue as a Christian mission to evangelize and proselytize others to join Christianity, but this is not the purpose of interreligious

² McKenzie Flowers Fergus, “Dialogue Speaks Louder as Action: Defining Interreligious Dialogue in Four Stages,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 30 (August 2020): 25.

³ Fergus, “Dialogue Speaks Louder as Action,” 25.

⁴ Sergey Melnik, “Types of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31 (November 2020): 48.

⁵ Kwok Pui Lan, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 22.

dialogue. The ultimate goal, according to Leonard Swidler, is to learn from one another so that interfaith partners can change when they are convinced and grow together in understanding.⁶

Interreligious dialogue is important for Myanmar because dialogue is the starting point to build trust among religious groups. Myanmar people have lost mutual trust toward each other. Politically, the public has lost trust in their political leaders since Myanmar has suffered under the military dictatorship for many decades, with detrimental results. As Myanmar politics cannot be separated with religion, especially Buddhism, and other religions have been oppressed by the majority Buddhists and Burmese government in different forms, people of other minor religions have lost trust in Buddhists. On the other hand, Buddhists have also lost their trust in other religions because of their misconception that other religions like Christianity and Islam will overpower Buddhism in the land of Buddhists. According to Smock, dialogue is “a path that is full of positive and constructive joint energy and that is based on creativity and trust.”⁷ He also says that “religion touches upon deeper levels of our identity” and religious identity is the subject to which we are “more sensitive and attentive.”⁸

Forms of Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue can take place in different settings, both intellectual and at the grassroots level. According to Paul Hedges, there are four forms of interreligious dialogue: (1) the dialogue of theological exchange; (2) the dialogue of life; (3) the dialogue of action, and (4) the dialogue of religious experience.⁹

⁶ Leonard Swidler, “Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for All Systematic Reflection Today,” in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 6.

⁷ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “The Miracles and Transformation through Interfaith Dialogue: Are You a Believer?” in Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, 16.

⁸ Abu-Nimer, “Miracles and Transformation through Interfaith Dialogue: Are You a Believer?” 16.

⁹ Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 60, 61.

The Dialogue of Theological Exchange: The dialogue of theological exchange is initiated to deepening people's understanding of various religious heritages and spiritual values. It uses intellectual and academic discussions, comparing theologies, philosophies, ideas, and concepts among different religions through which we can cultivate peace and harmony. Generally, it is common in academic, monastic, and interreligious organizations. This form of dialogue aims to promote mutual respect and understanding among different religions through sharing the knowledge of their own religious tradition. Gerard Forde acknowledges that this kind of dialogue helps "to clarify issues, to create greater understanding and remove prejudices" and helps dialogue partners to "appreciate each other's spiritual values and to have a better understanding of differences."¹⁰ In Myanmar, this form has taken place in some Christian theological seminaries and Buddhist universities. Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) is the pioneer religious institute to introduce interreligious dialogue in Myanmar and one of the leading seminaries for interreligious dialogue at an academic level. The Judson Research Center of MIT has been initiating interfaith dialogue programs with other religious institutions such as Buddhist universities and the Islamic community. It facilitates interfaith dialogue programs and educates Christians and other citizens on interreligious engagement through such programs as the Community Interfaith Dialogue Facilitation Training and the Interfaith Dialogue Awareness Training in different regions of the country.¹¹ The Judson Research Center also publishes theological journals and books on interfaith dialogue and interreligious education.

¹⁰ Gerard Forde, *A Journey Together: Muslims and Christians in Ireland: Building Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Cooperation* (Cork, Ireland: Cois Tine, 2013), 14.

¹¹ Judson Research Center, MIT, Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/judsonresearchcenter/?ref=page_internal.

The Dialogue of Life: The dialogue of life occurs when people strive to live in an open and welcoming spirit, sharing their daily life experiences. In this form, *people* and the “interactions” between people on a personal level or in “human dialogue” are the focal points.¹² In Myanmar, people easily get involved in this form of dialogue just by going about their everyday lives. As in all Asian countries, Myanmar people have a communal culture where people get together and chat with each other in marketplaces, tea shops, and schools. Myanmar people also celebrate many kinds of festivals throughout the year, both religious and cultural. These festivals are generally interreligious in which every person regardless of different religions can participate and dialogue with each other without having to discuss their personal religious beliefs. This form of dialogue is common and less challenging because it can take place without including any sensitive issue of religious beliefs and debating.

The Dialogue of Action: The dialogue of action happens when religious people collaborate for the common welfare of the community. Hedges says, “This is concerned with people coming together areas not seen as primarily ‘religious,’ but with more mundane affairs, such as human rights, ecological concerns, or other areas of social activism. This is not to say that there may not be common ‘religious’ values that inspire the work. It is also known as *secular dialogue*.”¹³ For Kujawa-Holbrook, a dialogue of action is “common among faith communities and focuses on collaborations between persons of different religious traditions addressing shared local issues.”¹⁴ Fergus stresses that in order to achieve the aims of dialogue of action which he defines as “liberation” and “integral human development,” there has to be

¹² Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 60.

¹³ Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 61.

¹⁴ Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning among Faith Communities* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 38.

“concrete action.”¹⁵ Action is “doing something” in communication by taking an active step towards collaboration and cooperation with another.¹⁶ Within this form of dialogue, Buddhists and Christians can come together to find answers to common human social issues in the country, such as human rights, environmental issues, capacity building, and education systems – all things that are concerns Myanmar citizens hold collectively. Therefore, this form of dialogue is one of the most important toward achieving the peacebuilding goals of interreligious dialogue in Myanmar as “it yields practical results and because it directly benefits the local community.”¹⁷ For example, we can see through social media that Myanmar people have come together in solidarity for many humanitarian causes, especially now given the current democratic government administration. People have come together to demand justice for children, equal rights for women, environmental justice, and other human rights. Regardless of religion and ethnicity, many charity and volunteer groups have been organized to assist the country during the Covid-19 pandemic. People around the country have been donating money, food, and medical supplies to those who are in need. And since the military coup in February 1st, 2021, people from all religious background come together in protesting the junta. There is no religious discussion and debate during the activities. However, we can reflect the actions that are carried out together and share why it was meaningful for everyone from our religious perspective and take time to appreciate what we shared. This shows that each person is simply regarded as a human being and equally valued. People can come together in solidarity.

¹⁵ Fergus, “Dialogue Speaks Louder as Action,” 31.

¹⁶ Fergus, “Dialogue Speaks Louder as Action,” 31.

¹⁷ Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders*, 38.

The Dialogue of Religious Experience: This form of interreligious dialogue happens when people from different religions come together to share their spiritual mystical experience through their religious rituals, practices in worship, prayers, and retreat programs. “It is also known as *interior dialogue*.”¹⁸ It is “a respectful and appreciative exchange whereas one compares and contrasts diverse perspectives on the religious and spiritual dimensions of human life.”¹⁹ This form is the most challenging step for most religious groups as every religion regards their religious ritual and practices as sacred. It is difficult and sensitive for Myanmar people, both Christians and others, to participate in this form of dialogue because of the lack of knowledge about other religions, the fear of losing their religious identities, and religious superiority and inferiority complexes – obstacles that will be discussed later in this paper. However, it is possible when people learn to accept and value each other’s religious tradition. These obstacles can be overcome by continuously building trust among different religions through the dialogue of life and the dialogue of action.

All these forms of interreligious dialogue can enrich interreligious education and peace education. They are interconnected forms that collectively and “more powerfully contribute to the goals of interreligious dialogue.”²⁰ According to Fergus, while approaching any of the four dialogue forms, “to demonstrate a disposition of inclusion and understanding by interreligious dialogue exchanges with a willingness to learn and collaborate” is important.²¹ Moreover, a positive and appreciative attitude without having an intention to convert the other is also

¹⁸ Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 60.

¹⁹ Fergus, “Dialogue Speaks Louder as Action,” 26.

²⁰ Fergus, “Dialogue Speaks Louder as Action,” 27.

²¹ Fergus, “Dialogue Speaks Louder as Action,” 28.

essential for every dialogue. In relation to the above four forms of interreligious dialogue, Leonard Swidler points out three other forms: (1) dialogue of the head; (2) dialogue of the hands, and (3) dialogue of the heart.²² Dialogue of head is “seeking the truth” in the level of cognitive or intellectual as the dialogue of theological exchange. Dialogue of hands is “seeking the good” in joining helping hands to heal the world as the dialogue of action. Dialogue of heart is “seeking the beauty” in receiving others.²³

Goals of Interreligious Dialogue

The main goal of interreligious dialogue in multi-religious society is to facilitate peacebuilding by reducing existing tensions among different religions. S. J. Samatha, the goal of religious dialogue as being, “to put an end to an era of anti-inter-religion and usher in an era of interreligious cooperation so necessary in the modern context of religion and society.”²⁴

To achieve the goal of interreligious dialogue, dialogue should be an open, honest, and sincere, where all participants are open to learning and growing together. For Paul Knitter, in the heart of a genuine dialogue, there is “a deep act of faith and trust.”²⁵ Knitter, identifies four pivotal elements of genuine dialogue: “the experience of **difference**, the **trust** that such differences are unitive rather than separative; and flowing from these two experiences, the resolve to **witness**, that is, to make known to one’s dialogical partner one’s own religious experiences and convictions, and the resolve to **listen and learn** from the experiences and

²² Leonard Swidler, “Understanding Dialogue,” in *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots*, ed. Rebecca Kratz Mays (Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 2008), 10.

²³ Swidler, “Understanding Dialogue,” 10.

²⁴ S. J. Samatha, *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1971), 21.

²⁵ Paul F. Knitter, “Interreligious Dialogue: What? Why? How?” in *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, ed. Leonard Swidler et al. (London: SCM Press, 1990), 19.

convictions of one's partner."²⁶ Dialogue requires two-way communication between the people involved – an ebb and flow between engaged listening and authentic sharing so each person learns more about the other and the true nature of their religion. Therefore, there must be an understanding that neither side possesses the “truth” ultimately and completely, but that both have room to learn from the other and need to seek further with respect for each other.²⁷

According to Panikkar, the purpose of interreligious dialogue is “not to win over the other or to come a total agreement or a universal religion” but is a form of “communication in order to bridge the gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstandings between the different cultures of the world, letting them speak and speak out their own insights in their own languages.”²⁸ Interreligious dialogue, according to Paul Knitter, is exchanging “experience and understanding between two or more partners with the intention that all partners grow in experience and understanding.”²⁹

In contrast to Panikkar's proposal of interreligious dialogue as to not win over the other to one's religion, Paul Knitter proposes a strong indication in interreligious dialogue saying that he wants to convert his partner. For him, the religious truth that he experienced is genuine that he cannot keep it only for himself. Therefore, he would seek not only to explain his religious truth but also persuade. He would want his partner to also experience what he experienced not as “winning over” but sharing.³⁰ On the other hand, he would also be willing to convert to the other

²⁶ Knitter, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 19.

²⁷ Leonard Swidler, “What is Dialogue?,” in *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137470690>.

²⁸ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), xvii.

²⁹ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 207.

³⁰ Knitter, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 22, 23.

partner's sharing through listening and learning to their witness. However, to convert others must not be the initial goal of interreligious dialogue.

In the context of Myanmar, the goal of interreligious dialogue is to remove long-standing negative feelings and misconceptions among people from different religions. Therefore, interreligious dialogue is important as it is the starting point to build trust among religious groups. Myanmar people have lost mutual trust toward each other and their political leaders. Because Myanmar politics cannot be separated with religion and because other religions have been oppressed by the majority Buddhists and Burmese government in different forms, people of other minor religions have lost trust in Buddhists. On the other hand, Buddhist have lost trust in other religions, especially Christians and Muslims. Most Myanmar Christians view interreligious dialogue as evangelistic mission which aims to convert others to Christianity. They want to persuade the dialogue partner that they need to change because Christianity is the only true religion, which makes it nearly impossible for people from other religions to feel comfortable dialoging with them. The goals of interreligious dialogue fail when one dialogue partner seeks to use it only as a way to persuade the other to their beliefs.

Interreligious dialogue benefits both dialogue partners. According to Swidler, the goals are: "(1) to know oneself ever more profoundly; (2) to know the other ever more authentically; (3) to live ever more fully accordingly."³¹ The general goal of dialogue is to learn and to change accordingly.³² In dialogue, both partners will learn to know themselves and their own traditions profoundly. They both will learn about each other and know one another more authentically.

³¹ Swidler, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue," 26.

³² Leonard Swidler, "A Dialogue on Dialogue," in Swidler et al., *Death or Dialogue?*, 62.

With that knowledge about oneself and the other, they will continue to live in society accordingly. According to John B. Cobb, dialogue partners must understand and accept that there are differences between them and be prepared to take those differences seriously.³³ There has to be mutual trust for and from each other.

Dr. Maung Maung Yin deepens the concept of interfaith dialogue for Christians in Myanmar saying that “it is to develop the spirit of dialogue when we discover a fuller relationship with God as a result of deeper relationship with our neighbors of other faiths.”³⁴ With that understanding, people of different faiths must build deeper relationship which is based on mutual trust and respect.

Prerequisites for Dialogue

According to Kwok Pui Lan, “Dialogue is the meeting between people of living faiths, and not between Christianity and other religions. Each one is speaking as a person of faith out of deep and firm commitment to his or her faith and tradition.”³⁵ It is important to understand that there will be different opinions and understandings even among people from the same religion. Interreligious dialogue partners must understand that at the outset, the table for dialogue is not a space of equality because the level of understanding about other religions differ. Furthermore, it can be a place of power imbalances prevail where some are privileged and other marginalized.³⁶ Therefore, everyone must seek to create a space where everyone can feel equally heard and

³³ John B. Cobb Jr., “Dialogue,” in Swidler et al., *Death or Dialogue?*, 3.

³⁴ Maung Maung Yin, “What Dialogue Is and Is Not,” in *Theology under the Bo Tree: Contextual Theologies in Myanmar*, ed. Samuel Ngun Ling (Yangon: Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2014), 1:340.

³⁵ Kwok, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding*, 21, 22.

³⁶ Moyaert, “On the Role of Ritual,” 49-60.

valued, which starts with each person having an awareness of their own privileges and taking responsibility for them.³⁷

A willingness and openness to learn from one another in dialogue with people of other religions is an essential prerequisite for genuine religious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue can be successful only when people authentically listen and respect the beliefs of the other person's tradition. Each dialogue participant must come to dialogue with openness and frankness, ready to learn from one another in "a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity."³⁸ Swidler points out three important things for genuine dialogue: (1) an openness to learn from the other, (2) knowledge of one's own tradition, and (3) a similarly disposed and knowledgeable dialogue partner from the other tradition.³⁹

Further, Swidler provides essential ground rules for interreligious dialogue:

1. The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn—that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly.
2. Interreligious, ideological dialogue must be a two-sided project—within each religious or ideological community, and between religious or ideological communities.
3. Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.
4. in interreligious dialogue, we must not compare our ideas with our partner's practice, but rather our ideals with our partner's ideals, our practice with our partner's practice.
5. All participants must define themselves. It is mandatory that all dialogue partners define what it means to be an authentic member of their own tradition.
6. Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to points of disagreement.
7. Dialogue can take place only between equals. Both must come to learn from each other.
8. Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust.
9. Persons entering into interreligious dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological tradition.
10. Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology from within.⁴⁰

³⁷ Moyaert, "On the Role of Ritual," 49-60.

³⁸ Kwok, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding*, 21, 22.

³⁹ Swidler, "A Dialogue on Dialogue," 60.

⁴⁰ Swidler, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue," 14, 15.

Interreligious dialogue is not based on commonalities but a respect and appreciation for differences. Gary D. Bouma, Rod Ling, and Anna Halahoff affirm that, “without great discipline, dialogue between these ‘agreeable groups’ can descend into polite conversation, rather than exploration and appreciation of difference.”⁴¹ Each partner must learn of the other with a genuine encounter of the self and the other. All rules are based on having a willing and open attitude toward learning from others in dialogue and mutual respect for each other.

Obstacles for Interreligious Dialogue between Myanmar Christians and Buddhists

There have been some common obstacles for interreligious dialogue to happen between Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar: religious exclusivism, the lack of knowledge about other religions, the fear of losing their religious identities, and religious superiority and inferiority complexes. These obstacles are interconnected. Religious exclusivism and the fear of losing their religious identities deter people from wanting to learn from other religions. And religious superiority and inferiority complexes are the reasons that people from one religion exclude other religions.

For instance, Christian’s belief in Jesus as the only true savior for all humanity excludes all other religions which do not talk about Jesus. This Christian exclusive view was introduced to the people of Burma by the American Baptist mission in the 19th century. The attitude of the American Baptist missionaries to Burma was to introduce Christianity as the superior religion and most Christians in Myanmar still maintain that attitude within their community.

Panikkar affirms that in the attitude of religious exclusivism, there is “a certain element of heroism.”⁴² Heroism in a religious context is when religious groups believe they are “saving”

⁴¹ Gary D. Bouma, Rod Ling, and Anna Halahoff, “The Impact of Religious Diversity and Revitalisation on Inter-religious Education for Citizenship and Human Rights,” in Engerbretson et al., *International Handbook*, 1064.

⁴² Panikkar, *Intrareligious Dialogue*, 5.

those of other religions by converting them to their own. Panikkar further concludes that this attitude “carries with it the obvious danger of intolerance, hubris, and contempt for others.”⁴³ John Hick states that exclusivism is “expressed in the dogma that non-Christians, as such, are cosigned to hell.”⁴⁴ He strongly condemned this attitude saying that it is, “as arrogant as it is cruel.”⁴⁵ Most religious conflicts begin with religious self-righteousness and self-heroism which tempts them to assume other religions are false and therefore inferior. The heroism of Christianity among Myanmar Christians is still seen as it was seeded by Christian missionaries from the West.

Even though everyone is welcome to participate in religious education provided in Myanmar Christian churches, the intention is to convert to that particular religion. Theologically speaking, many Myanmar Christians are not yet mature in their theological thinking. They still follow “centuries-old missionary teachings verbatim without critical questioning and without evaluating their contents. Being spoon-fed as such by missionary teachings, many Christians still hold a view or thought form that is quite exclusive to their faith, especially in relation to people of other faiths.”⁴⁶ Samuel Ngun Ling notes the problem here is that, “spoon-fed spirituality produces missionary compound mentality and an exclusive Christian attitude—a mentality that looks to the West alone for a model of life and attitude that makes Christians feel that they are

⁴³ Panikkar, *Intrareligious Dialogue*, 5.

⁴⁴ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 28.

⁴⁵ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 28.

⁴⁶ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Yangon: Judson Research Center, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2010), 18.

better than others *holier-than-thou* attitude.”⁴⁷ This mentality is instilled in many Myanmar Christians because Christianity has been the only focus in the church religious education system.

The attitude of religious heroism can be also seen in Myanmar Buddhism. The extreme Buddhist group called “Ma Ba Tha” (meaning to protect nationality and religion) in Myanmar holds this attitude, which has lead them to regard all other religions as their opponents. There are several examples of religious conflicts and violence between Buddhists and other religious minorities in the country, one of the most well-known being the Rohingya crises in Rakhain State, which made Myanmar an international concern. It is closely linked to religious and ethnic conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims. Panikkar stresses that religious heroism further “bears the intrinsic weakness of assuming an almost purely logical conception of truth and the uncritical attitude of an epistemological naivete.”⁴⁸

Berling affirms that Christians who hold this exclusive view are “concerned that engaging another religion might be disloyal or might even lead to conversion to the other faith.”⁴⁹ For instance, most Myanmar Churches strongly prohibit Christians from participating in Myanmar cultural festivals, such as the Burmese New Year celebration, a water festival held in April, fearing that attending this will lead Christians to convert to Buddhism. It is celebrated in some southeast Asia Buddhist countries including Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia as a New Year celebration. The water festival tradition is related closely to Buddhism because pouring and throwing water at one another is regarded as a part of Buddhist cleansing ritual to welcome the New Year. On the last day of this Burmese New Year celebration, Buddhists must

⁴⁷ Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar*, 18.

⁴⁸ Panikkar, *Intrareligious Dialogue*, 5.

⁴⁹ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 13.

visit their temple to carry out the religious activities in their pagodas and shrines. Most churches in the country will hold a church camp during the time of festival to prevent church members from participating in the water festival.

Herman's soft version of mono-religious education, "does look at other religions as ways to salvation. Human salvation is also attainable outside Christianity."⁵⁰ In the theology of religion, it is known as inclusivism. So a Christian inclusivist, while acknowledging that salvation can be found in Christianity, also recognizes, unlike the exclusivists, that people from other religions can be saved because the salvation act of Jesus Christ is for all humanity. Further, they believe people from other religions can also receive God's grace without their realization. The best example of this view is the theology of Karl Rahner. He formulated the term "anonymous Christian." For Rahner, being an anonymous Christian means that "a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity."⁵¹ A person who is not a Christian and might have never heard about Jesus Christ can be saved because of what Jesus Christ has done for the whole world. The saving work of Jesus Christ is for everyone.

The concept of anonymous Christianity was taught in the Catechism of Catholic churches. However, Evelina Orteza y Miranda, while acknowledging the movement from exclusivism to inclusivism as a good step, criticizes inclusivism as failing to consider other religions in their own right and on their own terms. She states that, "The truths in them [other religions] are accepted not because they are true, but because their origin which is reflected by them can be traced back to truth as proclaimed by a particular religion, in this case,

⁵⁰ C. A. M. Hermans, *Participatory Learning: Religious Education in a Globalizing Society* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 338.

⁵¹ Karl Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965-1982*, ed. Paul Imhof, Hubert Biallowons, and Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 135.

Christianity.”⁵² Inclusivism, according to Orteza y Miranda, is “to share the same nature and the same rationality with all human beings, as God’s creation, forming one community, suggests that we ought to treat all as partners in achieving one common goal, the searching and reaching for the truth.”⁵³

However, an inclusivist in the mono-religious model, “continues to consider its religious beliefs as the norm to which every other religious belief must conform.”⁵⁴ For Orteza y Miranda, “Inclusivism does not necessarily weaken the confidence of a believer in her beliefs, nor does she give up her commitment to them.”⁵⁵ However, inclusivism could go further “to look for possibilities or openings for connections with other religions, and understanding their spiritual aspirations and longing in hopes that one can learn something from the other and vice versa.”⁵⁶ The inclusive version of the mono-religious model teaches about other religions but it does so from the point of Christian truth.⁵⁷

These obstacles can be overcome by an attitude of willingness and openness to learn from others. This attitude can be gained from teaching the core truth all religions: to love others. In Christianity, the most important message is the gospel of love, peace, justice, and freedom through which God makes dialogue with humankind. Likewise, Buddhism is known as a religion of peace. Buddha’s teaching is based on love and compassion toward all sentient beings. In the

⁵² Evelina Orteza y Miranda, “Religious Pluralism and the Paradigm,” in Engerbretson et al., *International Handbook*, 15.

⁵³ Orteza y Miranda, “Religious Pluralism and the Paradigm,” 14.

⁵⁴ Orteza y Miranda, “Religious Pluralism and the Paradigm,” 15.

⁵⁵ Orteza y Miranda, “Religious Pluralism and the Paradigm,” 16.

⁵⁶ Orteza y Miranda, “Religious Pluralism and the Paradigm,” 16.

⁵⁷ Peta Goldberg, “Developing Pedagogies for Inter-religious Teaching and Learning,” in Engerbretson et al., *International Handbook*, 335.

Buddhist cultural context of Myanmar, loving others is essentially to respect the religion and culture of other people.

Interfaith Just Peacemaking

Interfaith Just Peacemaking is a great paradigm for a multi-religious society like Myanmar. Myanmar people can come together bringing their faith, beliefs, and perspectives in dialogue for peacebuilding activities as every religion speaks about peace and peacemaking. John Dear stresses that, “at the heart of each major religion is the vision of peace, the ideal of a reconciled humanity, the way of compassion and love and justice, the fundamental truth of nonviolence.”⁵⁸ He says:

Muslims explained that “Islam” means peace, that they are required to live at peace with other. Buddhists spoke of the way of compassion and respect toward all living beings. Jews spoke of the vision of Shalom, and Isaiah’s call that we “beat swords into plowshares” and “study war no more.” We Christians confessed that Jesus is nonviolent, that he called us to love our enemies, that he blessed peacemakers, that his last words before his martyrdom were “put down the sword,” and that his first words after his resurrection were “peace be with you.”⁵⁹

The practices of Just Peacemaking are, “ethically normative because they bring peace, they solve problems, they promote justice and cooperation in a world whose wars are immeasurably destructive.”⁶⁰ Just Peacemaking emphasizes “economic justice and human rights as care for the common good and the vulnerable, over against possessive individualism.”⁶¹ For Christianity, “peacemaking is that virtue of the Christian community that is required if the

⁵⁸ John Dear, *Put Down Your Sword: Answering the Gospel Call to Creative Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 21.

⁵⁹ Dear, *Put Down Your Sword*, 20.

⁶⁰ Brubaker et al., “Introduction: Just Peacemaking,” 17.

⁶¹ Glen H. Stassen, “Holistic, Interactive Character Formation for Just Peacemaking,” in *Formation of Life: Just Peacemaking and Twenty-First Century Discipleship*, ed. Glen H. Stassen and Rodney L. Petersen (La Vergne, TN: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 30.

church is to be a community of people at peace with one another in truth.”⁶² “Further, justice is central to the biblical story, from beginning to end.”⁶³ Throughout the history of Hebrew Bible, “the prophets teach that the way to avoid the judgment and destruction of war is to return to God and practice justice.”⁶⁴ Jesus stood for the oppressed and the poor to get justice (Luke 4:18-19). Likewise, we can also draw many examples of peacemaking from other religious traditions.

There are ten practices of *Just Peacemaking*, originating from within the Christian tradition:

1. Support Nonviolent Direct Action
2. Take Independent Initiatives to Reduce Threat
3. Use Cooperative Conflict Resolution
4. Acknowledge Responsibility for Conflict and Injustice and Seek Repentance and Forgiveness
5. Advance Democracy, Human Rights, and Interdependence
6. Foster Just and Sustainable Economic Development
7. Work with Emerging Cooperative Forces in the International System
8. Strengthen the United Nations and International Efforts for Cooperation and Human Rights
9. Reduce Offensive Weapons and Weapons Trade
10. Encourage Grassroots Peacemaking Groups and Voluntary Associations⁶⁵

⁶² Stanley Hauerwas, “Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church,” in *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael G. Long (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 263.

⁶³ Brubaker et al., “Introduction: Just Peacemaking,” 23.

⁶⁴ Brubaker et al., “Introduction: Just Peacemaking,” 23.

⁶⁵ Brubaker et al., “Introduction: Just Peacemaking,” 17.

These practices stand between traditional Just War Theory and pacifism, joined with religious teachings – especially Christianity but not limited to it. While calling for a commitment to the religious teaching on peace and nonviolence, they are practices for political initiative peacemaking process with the aim to end war and any system of violence. Even though these ten practices are originated within the Christian tradition, they are purposely formulated to be adaptable by people of many faiths according to the original authors of *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*.⁶⁶ They say that “each person can base these practices on his or her own faith.”⁶⁷ Their vision is grounded in three theological convictions: initiatives, justice, and love and community which provide “a logical ordering for the ten essential practices of peacemaking.”⁶⁸

In later years, Susan B. Thistlethwaite worked on *Interfaith Just Peacemaking* from the perspectives of Jews, Christians, and Muslims on the new paradigm of peace and war based on the ten practices of just peacemaking. For each practice, the authors try to dialogue between the present political issues and the scriptures and traditions from each religion and show how they can act together. For example, to support nonviolent action, i.e., practice #1, there are bases to draw from in all three religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. They do likewise for each practice, bringing out their faith and putting it into practice.

In the context of Myanmar, it is still challenging for religious leaders to bring political issues to the table of religious dialogue, especially leaders from minor religions because there is a complete separation between religion and state. Despite this separation between religion and

⁶⁶ Brubaker et al., “Introduction: Just Peacemaking,” 17.

⁶⁷ Brubaker et al., “Introduction: Just Peacemaking,” 17.

⁶⁸ Brubaker et al., “Introduction: Just Peacemaking,” 19.

state though, Buddhism is practiced in most of the political and government ceremonies such as inaugurating government programs.

Peacemaking Initiatives

There are three parts divided into the ten practices of just peacemaking.

Support Nonviolent Direct Action: Supporting nonviolent direct action is a practice used to demand justice and rights from the political authority. The core concept of nonviolence is based on religious teachings. Martin Luther King Jr., who effectively used the method of nonviolence in the United States to stand against racism and injustice, adapted the concept from Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was inspired by many religious teachings on nonviolence which include Sermon on the Mt. from Christianity, love and compassion from Buddhism, and the concept of *ahimsa* from Jainism. According to John Cartwright and Susan Thistlethwaite, there are several practices of nonviolent direct action: boycotts, strikes, marches, civil disobedience, public disclosure, accompaniment, and safe spaces.⁶⁹ There are many figures who have used many of these practices to demand justice throughout history, including Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar people. Nonviolence initiatives and practices will be widely discussed later.

Take Independent Initiatives to Reduce Threat: This practice is important for the context of Myanmar where there are still civil wars in the country between the Myanmar military, *tatmadaw*, and ethnic armed groups. Many ethnic groups in some states in Myanmar have to survive in the midst of life-threatening civil wars. Taking independent initiatives to reduce threat is, “to take initiatives to decrease the other side’s distrust or threat perception, in order to induce

⁶⁹ John Cartwright and Susan Thistlethwaite, “Support Nonviolent Direct Action,” in Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm*, 38.

them to take similar initiatives or to negotiate seriously to remove threats.”⁷⁰ In the United States, this strategy of independent initiatives is advocated by churches such as the United Church of Christ, the Methodists churches, and the Catholic churches.⁷¹ For churches in Myanmar, it is challenging to take up the practice of carrying out independent initiatives at the government level. However, in the midst of this difficult situation, it is a small light to see the organization called Danmission, which is based on the Christian faith for the common good of human society, working together in partnership with developing countries, including Myanmar. In Myanmar, Danmission has been “working on poverty reduction and strengthening peaceful coexistence and dialogue across ethnicities and beliefs in Myanmar” since 2007.⁷² Danmission closely works with the Judson Research Center, MIT, the Association of Theological Education in Myanmar, the Myanmar Council of Churches, the Shalom Foundation, Ethnic Youths Development Center, the Gender Equality Network, and Wunpawng Ninghtoi.⁷³ Myanmar religious institutions can find more opportunities to partner with other international organizations and apply the strategy of independent initiatives.

Use Cooperative Conflict Resolution: “Cooperative conflict resolution emphasizes active co-working by parties in conflicts; they attempt to develop creative solutions that each can affirm and support.”⁷⁴ This action is highly important for Myanmar because there have been internal conflicts and bitter experiences among the people, especially ethnic and religious minorities who

⁷⁰ Glen Stassen, “Take Independent Initiatives to Reduce Threat,” in Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm*, 58.

⁷¹ Stassen, “Take Independent Initiatives,” 62.

⁷² “Myanmar,” Danmission, <https://english.danmission.dk/project/myanmar/>, accessed May 7, 2020.

⁷³ “Myanmar.”

⁷⁴ Steven Brion-Meisels, et al., “Use Cooperative Conflict Resolution,” in Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm*, 71.

have always been unfairly treated. For instance, in 2012, a conflict broke out between Buddhists and Muslims after three Muslims men raped and killed a young Rakhain Buddhist girl. Since then, conflict between Buddhists and Muslims has turned into a severe religious conflict across the country. A Burmese anti-Muslim national movement drafted discriminatory interfaith marriage laws known as the Law on Protection of Race and Religion to the parliament as a response to the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in the country. The proposed laws include a ban on polygamy, legislation to control population, and a conversion law. A Buddhist woman seeking to marry a man from other religion must first ask permission from her parents and local government official. Any man who marries a Buddhist woman is required to convert to Buddhism. Opposition groups have tried to stop the laws because they hinder people's religious freedom, but shockingly Myanmar parliament passed the law in 2015. There have been many Myanmar citizens including Burmese, the majority ethnic group, and other minority ethnic groups that have suffered under this marriage law. There are many other examples of how the corrupted system has treated the citizens causing bitterness toward one another as well.

One effective practice for conflict resolution is restorative justice. According to *Just Peacemaking: the New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, restorative justice incorporates and increases the power of Cooperative Conflict Resolution because it has a strong commitment to “cultural competence” and “interdependence of individual members within the community.”⁷⁵ Another important practice toward conflict resolution is reconciliation which ultimately “is a journey toward and through conflict.”⁷⁶ Reconciliation requires courage to face

⁷⁵ Brion-Meisels, et al., “Use Cooperative Conflict Resolution,” 77.

⁷⁶ John Paul Lederach, “The Journey toward Reconciliation,” in *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael G. Long (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 291.

one's fears and anxieties which demands "an outward and an inward journey."⁷⁷ It always involves "turning toward the people who have contributed to our pain."⁷⁸

Acknowledge Responsibility for Conflict and Injustice and Seek Repentance and Forgiveness: This practice requires great courage to acknowledge all wrongdoing and take responsibility. It is, "the assumption that acknowledgments of wrongdoing on all sides, empathy, forbearance from revenge, and overt hope for reconciliation are necessary practices in the work of peacemaking."⁷⁹ In some countries like Germany and Japan, leaders have acknowledged their nations' guilt during the Holocaust and the World War II, respectively. Though there were many controversial issues in his speech at the 70th anniversary of the end of the second World War, Shinzo Abe, the prime minister of Japan, acknowledged and expressed his feeling of guilt for the countless killings in Japan, Korea, China, and Southeast Asia during WWII.⁸⁰ Myanmar military have failed to apologize and take responsibility for the conflict and injustice they have committed to their people throughout history and thus, it is difficult to reconcile between the military and the people. For Myanmar, this practice of sincere repentance and forgiveness is still a difficult step because even among the current democratic government, there is bitter tension toward the military regime. An experienced mediation team with effective strategies to help

⁷⁷ Lederach, "Journey toward Reconciliation," 291.

⁷⁸ Lederach, "The Journey toward Reconciliation," 291.

⁷⁹ Alan Geyer and Donald W. Schriver, "Acknowledge Responsibility for Conflict and Injustice and Seek Repentance and Forgiveness," in Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm*, 100.

⁸⁰ Michael J. Green, "Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's August 14 Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of the Second World War," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 14, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/prime-minister-shinzo-abe%E2%80%99s-august-14-statement-70th-anniversary-end-second-world-war>.

facilitate honest and sincere dialogue and navigate through the trauma many have experienced is vital for repentance and forgiveness to take place in Myanmar.

Justice

Advance Democracy, Human Rights, and Interdependence: Strengthening democracy and its norms, including promoting human rights and interdependency, is important in just peacemaking. Educating people about democracy and human rights is the most important task for a country like Myanmar because these are still new concepts for many Myanmar people. For example, a voting system was recently introduced into the political system, but many people do not have any education about what it means to vote. Therefore, in Myanmar, educating people about basic human rights actions such as voting and its meaning is an important step for promoting justice in the country.

Foster Just and Sustainable Economic Development: “Advocating just and sustainable development means recommending a change in relationships that will bring about new opportunities for the poor.”⁸¹ Under the Burmese military government, people – especially ethnic minorities – lost their own land, natural resources, and human rights, and became poorer. There is a huge gap between the rich and the poor in Myanmar. Therefore, to be a peacemaker means also to work for the poor, “establishing direct relationships with them, advocating an increased access to protect their property and human rights from control by the powers that would keep them in their present trap.”⁸² In order to rebuild peace, there need to be equal and sustainable economic development throughout the country.

⁸¹ David Bronkema, David Lumsdaine, and Rodger A. Payne, “Foster Just and Sustainable Economic Development,” in Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm*, 152.

⁸² Bronkema, Lumsdaine, and Payne, “Foster Economic Development,” 152.

Love and Community

Work with Emerging Cooperative Forces in the International System, Strengthen the United Nations and International Efforts for Cooperation and Human Rights, Reduce Offensive Weapons and Weapons Trade: These three practices require working together with various international organizations. There are many nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations working in Myanmar as mediators to help build peace. Many of these organizations are connected to the United Nations, which seems to be the most “capable of sustained peacekeeping operation, and it provides the only genuinely international forum for considering, authorizing, and legitimizing multilateral action.”⁸³ However, there is not always a great deal of trust toward these international organizations, both from the military government and the ethnic armed groups due to the history of Western colonialism in the country. The former Myanmar military government’s mistreatment of minority people in the country is one of the main reasons for civil war in the country. However, the ethnic crisis is strongly connected with Western colonialism. British colonialism did not end after Myanmar received her independence in 1948. Colonialism continued to create a large divide between Burmese majority and other minority ethnic groups. The colonists also brought Christianity and Western culture to the country. Therefore, majority Burmese Buddhists have a very strong negative image about the Westerners.

The nation should acknowledge the important role the United Nations plays in peacebuilding, including responsibility to prevent harm, react when harm occurs, and rebuild after harm has taken place. Citizens who are working with international organizations should also “urge their governments to create and support collective mechanisms for the management of

⁸³ Paul W. Schroeder, “Work with Emerging Cooperative Forces in the International System,” in Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm*, 173.

conflict and the construction of peace both within and between states.”⁸⁴ The international community should continue to pressure the government to respect fundamental human rights, religious rights, and democracy in a nation.

Encourage Grassroots Peacemaking Groups and Voluntary Associations: “A just peacemaking theory presupposes not only individual peacemakers, but a community of peacemakers. It requires groups of citizens who take peacemaking initiatives themselves and who encourage governments to do so.”⁸⁵ Peacemakers and volunteers from the grassroots can get involved in peacemaking by working in the NGOs and INGOs. Grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations are vital because they can speak for the voiceless, the oppressed, the poor, and the powerless as they themselves have experienced the injustice in society.

Nonviolent Movement

The nonviolent movement is widely used for several purposes, such as conflict resolution, social justice and reform, national defense, nation building, and the protection of democracy.⁸⁶ Nonviolence is not just a political strategy, but also a shared way of life that invites everyone to dialogue together to solve a conflict. Therefore, as Carter Heyward says, nonviolence can be possible only through our power in mutual relation.⁸⁷ What we need today is a culture of peace through nonviolent strategies. I. Arul Aram says, “Both violence and non-violence are strategies to balance power. Violence usually spirals into a cycle and creates new

⁸⁴ Schroeder, “Work with Emerging Cooperative Forces,” 173.

⁸⁵ Duane K. Friesen, “Encourage Grassroots Peacemaking Groups and Voluntary Associations,” in Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm*, 201.

⁸⁶ Mary King, *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.: The Power of Nonviolent Action* (Paris, Fr.: UNESCO, 1999).

⁸⁷ Carter Heyward, “Compassion and Nonviolence: A Spiritual Path,” in *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael G. Long (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 284.

victims. But non-violent approaches to conflicts ripen the conditions for transforming relationships and structures while stopping the cycle of violence.”⁸⁸ Ethnic armed groups have been trying to achieve peace in Myanmar through civil wars for centuries, but there is not a single sliver hope for peace through killing each other.

There are many violent acts against religious and ethnic minorities in Myanmar by Buddhist extremists who are fueled by the military to sustain their power through creating religious and ethnic conflicts. However, there are also Myanmar Buddhist monks, the spiritual leaders of the people, who play an important leadership role for the people against the unjust system of the military regime. In the history of Myanmar, Buddhist monks have often led the nonviolent movement against the military dictatorship and economic injustice in the country. Buddhist monks took part in nonviolent protesting by putting their begging bowls upside down, which is called *tabeik maunk*. They refused to receive alms from the military and their families. Doing so symbolized breaking the bond that tied their spirituality to the Buddha and which is considered the greatest punishment among Buddhists. Buddhist monks believe that, as spiritual leaders, they have spiritual duties to provide their people and one of them is to lead in standing against the social and political injustice in the country through nonviolence. According to Walter Wink, even though nonviolent action does not immediately change the heart of the oppressors, it does affect those committed to it.⁸⁹

Nonviolence is misunderstood by some Myanmar Christians as passively withdrawing from social and political engagement by avoiding any killing and any violent activities.

⁸⁸ I. Arul Aram, “Imparting Peace-Building through Education,” *International Journal of Innovation and Research in Educational Sciences* 3, no. 2 (March 2016): 164, <https://www.ijires.org/index.php/issues?view=publication&task=show&id=168&msclid=11dbebcda59611ecad869706737eb009>.

⁸⁹ Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 26.

According to Stanley Hauerwas, nonviolence is not just a mere exception but practicing nonviolence is what it means to follow Christ.⁹⁰ In Myanmar, people have been always taught by their leaders to passively obey the authority at home, in the schools, and in the country because it is the duty of good citizens. For Christians, this means submission to the will of God. For many decades, Myanmar people especially Christians have responded to the military regime with passivity, perpetuating the unjust system as a submission to the will of God.

Nonviolent direct action came to the attention in the United States as the method used effectively by Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.⁹¹ “The practice of nonviolent direct action is an obligatory norm where nonviolently it can transform festering injustice into constructive change.”⁹² There are several practices of nonviolent direct action according to John Cartwright and Susan Thistlethwaite: boycotts, strikes, marches, civil disobedience, public disclosure, accompaniment, and safe spaces.⁹³

According to Walter Wink, there are three responses to evil and injustice system: (1) passivity, (2) violent opposition, and (3) the third way of militant nonviolence articulated by Jesus.⁹⁴ Wink argues that Jesus neither proposed the first, to flight, nor the second, to fight. He taught his followers to use the third way by giving three examples in Matthew 5:39-41.

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (NIV)

⁹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, foreword to *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael G. Long (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), xvii.

⁹¹ Cartwright and Thistlethwaite, “Support Nonviolent Direct Action,” 42.

⁹² Cartwright and Thistlethwaite, “Support Nonviolent Direct Action,” 42, 43.

⁹³ Cartwright and Thistlethwaite, “Support Nonviolent Direct Action.”

⁹⁴ Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 12.

Here, the nonviolence act of Jesus has been wrongly interpreted by many Christians to respond to evil with passivity or non-resistance. In all these three examples, Jesus explained how the oppressed can affirm their human dignity without engaging in violent acts toward the oppressors. The responses to the striker, the person who sues, and the one who imposes forced labor, rob “the oppressor of the power to humiliate.”⁹⁵ Jesus’ response to the oppressor was a nonviolence way of reclaiming the human dignity of the oppressed. In the first example, by turning the other cheek it was not possible for the master to strike back with his forehead because by doing that, “the slave was defying his master and emphasizing his own humanity.”⁹⁶ The second example was a form of economic oppression. Jesus advised the one who was sued to let the oppressor have their inner cloth as well. In Jesus’ culture, it was the shameful for rich people to take everything from someone who was poorer. In the third example, according to Irfan A. Omar, and Michael K. Duffey, Jesus was prescribing a nonviolent strategy in which the oppressed could challenge oppression and assert their dignity.⁹⁷ The way Jesus responded, “asserts human dignity those who are seemingly powerless can alter the behavior of the oppressor.”⁹⁸

Another nonviolent act of Jesus is in Matt. 26:52:

“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?”

⁹⁵ Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 16.

⁹⁶ Michael K. Duffey, “Christianity: From Peacemaking to Violence and Home Again,” in *Peacemaking and the Challenge of Violence in World Religions*, ed. Irfan A. Omar and Michael K. Duffey (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 52.

⁹⁷ Duffey, “Christianity: From Peacemaking to Violence,” 52.

⁹⁸ Duffey, “Christianity: From Peacemaking to Violence,” 52.

This was the saying of Jesus at the moment when he was arrested and one of his disciples reached for his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus stopped his disciples from responding to violence with violence. His third way is centered at the heart of loving one's enemies, which is the hardest thing to do during conflict.⁹⁹ Wink states that love of enemies is the recognition that an enemy, too, is a child of God.¹⁰⁰ The love of God for all is the fundamental philosophy of Jesus' ethic of nonviolent action, the same ethic that was carried by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Gandhi and King are prominent leaders who practiced non-violence movement as a means to demand freedom and justice.

Nonviolent action does not need to come from a religious background. However, the philosophy behind nonviolent struggles is usually based on religious teachings. According to Eboo Patel, social activists like Gandhi and King used their leadership role to promote the stories of social justice engagement in relating to "a vision for religious pluralism."¹⁰¹ Both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were influenced by the teachings of religions to practice nonviolent action in fight for liberation and social justice. Both Gandhi and King were convinced that "nonviolent action was the most practical way of wielding power while minimizing harm."¹⁰²

Mahatma Gandhi and Nonviolence

Mahatma Gandhi was known for his nonviolent struggle against racism in South Africa,

⁹⁹ Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 57.

¹⁰⁰ Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 59.

¹⁰¹ Eboo Patel, April Kunze, and Noah Silverman, "Interfaith Leadership: Bringing Religious Groups Together," in *Crossing the Divide: Intergroup Leadership in a World of Difference*, ed. Todd L. Pittinsky (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 240.

¹⁰² King, *Gandhi and King Jr.*, 6.

imperialism and colonial rule in India, caste system, economic exploitation of the poorest peasants and workers, internecine strife between the Hindus and Muslims, and sexism and cruelty toward women.¹⁰³ His philosophy of nonviolence, which was based on love, forgiveness and nonviolent action, have spread throughout the world, transforming societies. His method of nonviolence is not only a method of “instituting change, but also as capable of transforming even the hardest of hearts.”¹⁰⁴

Gandhi believed that there is always a third way if one is genuinely committed to nonviolence. He saw the common spiritual ground of nonviolence in every religion. Originating in his own Hindu tradition, Gandhi was influenced by other Eastern religions and the deep truth of those religions, especially Jainism and Buddhism. He was impressed by Mahavira, the founder of Jainism who had two guiding principles: (1) saving one’s soul from evil could come about only through a most severe asceticism, turning away from the things of this world and toward activity of the mind and spirit, and (2) the purity of one’s soul required practicing ahimsa, or noninjury to all living beings.¹⁰⁵ He adopted the fundamental philosophy of Jainism, “*ahimsa*,” meaning “not to harm,” which is a powerful essence of nonviolence. It became the foundational concept behind Gandhi’s nonviolent and passive resistance.¹⁰⁶ He also studied Christianity and was influenced by the Christian teaching of love for all creatures and the teachings of Jesus,

¹⁰³ King, *Gandhi and King Jr.*, 76, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Sanjay Lal, “Gandhian Nonviolence as Not Presupposing Human Goodness,” in *Positive Peace: Reflections on Peace Education, Nonviolence, and Social Change*, ed. Andrew Fitz-Gibbon (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 23.

¹⁰⁵ King, *Gandhi and King Jr.*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ King, *Gandhi and King Jr.*, 14.

especially Sermon on the Mount. He practiced nonviolent activities such as boycotts, strikes, and civil disobedience against injustice systems in the society.

Gandhi distinguished between the “nonviolence of the weak,” which uses harassment to break the opponent, and the “nonviolence of the strong” (what he called *satyagraha* or Truth force) which seeks the opponents’ good by freeing him or her from oppressive actions.¹⁰⁷ And Gandhi chose to walk the path of nonviolence of the strong, *satyagraha* which is associated with the word *ahimsa*, “refusal to do harm.”¹⁰⁸ Gandhi understood *ahimsa* as an active force, a force pitted against violence, the normal law of human nature, and the way of the strong and the brave. For Gandhi, that force of *ahimsa* is love, the unconditional love which is even powerful enough to love one’s enemies. Love of enemies, according to Wink, “is trusting God for the miracle of divine forgiveness.”¹⁰⁹ There is a willingness to learn forgiveness in that love which “is not an option for people who are serious about survival and quality of life” because it makes quality of life possible for both the givers and recipients.¹¹⁰ There is concern about justice in forgiveness, but Miroslar Volf says that forgiveness and justice do not stand against each other because “forgiveness is possible only against the backdrop of a tacit affirmation of justice.”¹¹¹ It is described that, “to offer forgiveness is at the same time to condemn the deed and accuse the doer; to receive forgiveness is at the same time to admit to the deed and accept the blame.”¹¹² In the

¹⁰⁷ Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 63.

¹⁰⁸ Terrence J. Rynne, *Gandhi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 53.

¹⁰⁹ Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 68.

¹¹⁰ Heyward, “Compassion and Nonviolence,” 285.

¹¹¹ Miroslar Volf, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Christian Contribution to a More Peaceful Environment,” in *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael G. Long (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 300.

¹¹² Volf, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice,” 300.

process of peacebuilding and reconciliation, forgiveness with nonviolent action is the most essential element.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Nonviolence

Martin Luther King stood against racism and slavery during his time using nonviolent actions and building a nonviolent movement. He believed that nonviolence was the only choice that could end Jim Crow for Black people. He became aware of the theory of nonviolent resistance from reading *On Civil Disobedience* by Henry David Thoreau.¹¹³ Walter Rauschenbusch's theology, known as the social gospel, inspired King to work for the holistic salvation of the entire human being which include social justice in the society.¹¹⁴ King was the first person to introduce and use the idea of Gandhi's nonviolence philosophy in resisting racial injustice in the United States. He encountered Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy while listening to a sermon on Gandhi's life and ideas on nonviolence by Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, the president of Howard University.¹¹⁵ He was fascinated and influenced by Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy based on love and held onto Gandhi's method, believing that it was the most powerful weapon for the revolution against racism in the United States.

According to Mary King, King's nonviolent struggle was comprised of five elements.¹¹⁶ First, it is not a method for coward or passivity but the way of the strong. Second, it seeks understanding and the awakening of a sense of morality without humiliating and defeating the enemies. Third, the target of nonviolence is, fundamentally, the evil that creates the corrupt

¹¹³ King, *Gandhi and King Jr.*, 94.

¹¹⁴ King, *Gandhi and King Jr.*, 94.

¹¹⁵ King, *Gandhi and King Jr.*, 95.

¹¹⁶ King, *Gandhi and King Jr.*, 101.

system, not the people involved themselves. According to Carter Heyward, nonviolence is the first fruit of compassion which, is a practical commitment not to harm the opponent if at all possible.¹¹⁷ Fourth, the willingness to struggle and to suffer is “transformational.” Fifth, in the nonviolent struggle, the resister refuses to use violent action but also rejects inward violence of the spirit – hatred – by choosing to love. James H. Cone says that King “contended that nonviolence was the most potent weapon for both blacks in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and for other oppressed peoples struggling for justice throughout the world.”¹¹⁸ In his struggle, King was affirmed in his commitment to the Christian understanding of God’s love and Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence as the expression of God’s love. King believed it was the most suitable method for a Black community because it was deeply Christian and biblical as Gandhi’s nonviolence was fully based on the principles of *agape* love.

2007 Myanmar Saffron Revolution

The Saffron Revolution was an economic and political protest and demonstration that took place in August 2007, led by Myanmar Buddhist monks. The reason for the protest was because the military government made an announcement of massive increases in the price of gas and oil. The raising the price of gas and oil seriously affected the poor because it made them unable to afford the subsequent more expensive bus fare. According to David Steinberg, “One of the tenets of a Buddhist society is that the government must provide the conditions under which the people can practice their religion and thus improve their karmas. This includes the concern of the *Sangha*, or Buddhist monkhood, for the well-being of the people.”¹¹⁹ However, the military

¹¹⁷ Heyward, “Compassion and Nonviolence,” 283.

¹¹⁸ James H. Cone, “Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence,” *Phylon* 49, no. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter, 2001): 173.

¹¹⁹ David Steinberg, “Globalization, Dissent, and Orthodoxy: Burma/Myanmar and the Saffron Revolution,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 9, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2008): 53.

government had failed to consider the well-being of her people and therefore, Buddhist monks from the central Myanmar initiated nonviolent protest which was followed by many other civilians. Many students and young people joined the protest and formed “a protective cordon on both sides of the long lines of robed monks, indicative of the extreme reverence shown to the *Sangha*.”¹²⁰ The demonstration spread throughout many other regions such as Pakokku, Sittwe, and Mandalay. The protest was forcefully stopped by the military regime with brutal violence. Hundreds of Buddhist monks and people were killed, and many were arrested and imprisoned.

The Saffron Revolution is not the only nonviolent protest that has happened in Myanmar. There was another nonviolence demonstration, a political protest by students in 1988 known as “the 8888 uprising.” Many Buddhist monks also joined in the protest. The military government used extreme violence to break the protest, killing and arresting thousands of people including many Buddhist monks and students. The nonviolent movement in Myanmar has been questioned because in both the 8888 uprising and the Saffron Revolution, many monks, students, and citizens were killed and imprisoned but there was no good result.

Was nonviolence not the right method in demanding Myanmar democracy? According to Michael N. Nagler, “Nonviolence offers many ways to create permanent, long-term positive changes that would enable us to rebuild social institutions on a more humane and sustainable basis.”¹²¹ In the case of Myanmar, the nonviolence revolution did not seem to bring immediate changes in the political system. Instead, many suffered and were lost. However, those nonviolent movements have resulted significant changes in Myanmar’s journey to democracy. Since 2010,

¹²⁰ Steinberg, “Globalization, Dissent, and Orthodoxy,” 53.

¹²¹ Michael N. Nagler, *The Nonviolence Handbook: A Guide for Practical Action* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2014), chapter 1, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Myanmar started to change the government system from a dictatorship to a democratic system. The government of National League of Democracy is in large part the result of nonviolent movements. Nonviolence is a long-term constructive method and “a positive force” in the peacebuilding process.¹²² Until the military coup again on February 1, 2021, Myanmar was positively moving toward achieving democracy even though it was not full democracy yet. Currently, Myanmar people are going through another political movement against the military coup called Spring Revolution.

2021 Spring Revolution in Myanmar

Myanmar military detained all elected parliament members including the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint on February 1, 2021 and controlled the power again. After the military coup on February 1st, Myanmar people started many nonviolent protest forms against the military coup such as millions of people young and old marching on the streets, Civil Disobedience Movement and boycotting the military-products and business. Still there is a question and doubt from the people about non-violence being the way to achieving democracy in the country. With that question, many young people started to take arms and formed People Defense Group (PDF) to fight against the cruel military coup saying that they have the right to defend and protect themselves by taking arms. During this spring revolution, people have struggle between non-violence and violence self-defense strategy. Many young people took arms believing that non-violence was not going to work in current political situation. They have considered violent self-defense strategy as a way to protect the people, the oppressed from the cruelty of the military junta. Daniel J. Ott’s definition of Martin Luther King’s philosophy of nonviolence was “morally superior to violence because it allows

¹²² Nagler, *The Nonviolence Handbook*, chapter 1.

people to engage in conflict while honoring the moral primacy of human life.”¹²³ On the other hand, Ott also questioned, “Who is being called upon to suffer and sacrifice?” and whose lives matter?¹²⁴ For Ott, even King was careful “never to condemn blacks who hold open the possibility of violent self-defense or even those who engage in more chaotic rioting.”¹²⁵ The opposition group that Myanmar people are facing is the military who had overwhelming armed force and they have not a sense of moral humanity and it seems it is fair to take arms for Myanmar young people to defend themselves and the people from the violent attack of the military coup. However, Ott strongly support King’s approach of nonviolence being the only way to build peace for the society. According to Ott, King envisioned the “pragmatic applicability of nonviolence as superior to violence.”¹²⁶ King avoided all methods of malice, hate and violence, which he believed have characterized their oppressors, in fighting for freedom.

James Cone compared the nonviolence of King and the violence of the self-defense method of Malcolm in his article “Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence.” For Malcom, using violence for the purpose of defense is an essential element of humanity, which is contrary to King’s concept of nonviolence.¹²⁷ For King, “even in defeat, nonviolence still wins.”¹²⁸ Cone concludes that we must not simply adopt nonviolence or violence. Rather we

¹²³ Daniel J. Ott, “Nonviolence and the Nightmare: King and Black Self-Defense,” in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (January 2018): 64.

¹²⁴ Ott, “Nonviolence and the Nightmare,” 65.

¹²⁵ Ott, “Nonviolence and the Nightmare,” 67.

¹²⁶ Ott, “Nonviolence and the Nightmare,” 73.

¹²⁷ Cone, “Martin and Malcolm,” 180.

¹²⁸ Cone, “Martin and Malcolm,” 178.

must find ways for ourselves based on our context. In Myanmar, Civil Disobedience Movement has been one of the successful nonviolent protests which makes the military hard to control the ruling system in the country. In the meantime, the elected government, National Unity Government (NUG), is working hard to become legitimate government in the international level. People Defense Groups have been formed in many regions which will military of NUG. As Cone suggests, our differences should not destroy our much needed unity.¹²⁹

Conclusion

The purpose of interreligious education is to pursue peace and solidarity among different religions. Peacebuilding is a process connected to the whole social system. The education system is one of the most important parts of the effort to build peace in Myanmar because education imparts knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills that are important for living peacefully with others in society. Education promotes human rights, social equality, and a culture of peace. Most religious conflicts in the country, are started by people who are uneducated, who are often used and in many ways “brainwashed” by religious extremists. And most religious extremists are people who grow up under the oppressive and exclusive educational system. Therefore, the education system in Myanmar should be revisited as it is directly related to religious education. The next chapter examines Myanmar’s education system and contemporary approaches to interreligious learning.

¹²⁹ Cone, “Martin and Malcolm,” 182.

Chapter 3

Interreligious Learning and Education

Education is our hope for the future: it is the best resource and means for countering these dangerous trends of prejudice, violence and exclusion that plague our society.

— Tiffany Puett¹

Introduction

Myanmar's education system has been oppressed ever since military dictatorships ruled the country, preventing imagination from being actualized. Since the system has been corrupted for over six decades, teachers and faculty became under qualified, especially when it comes to talking and teaching about religion. Consequently, the corrupted education system has disrupted national peace and solidarity among different religions. This oppressive education system has made clear the social inequality between the rich and the poor, and the ethnic minority and majority in the country. Corruption is common in the state education system. Good results in examination can be acquired with money. School curricula and learning materials do not prepare students to practically apply what they've learned to the current state of society. Therefore, for every religion, religious education has become essential to morally educate and teach people how to live in peace within society. For instance, Christian students depend on *Church* school for their moral and spiritual life rather than their secular education. Likewise, Buddhist parents send their children to their *dharma* school during summer holidays. However, there is a question how each religion's religious education system operates in relation to other religious education systems. Interreligious education is important for a country, especially for Myanmar, to build

¹ Tiffany Puett, "On Transforming Our World: Critical Pedagogy for Interfaith Education," *Cross Currents* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 264.

peace. In order to promote interreligious education, the education system should be reconstructed.

The field of interreligious education is, by nature, interdisciplinary. Among many disciplines, I will explore some educational theories such as Whitehead, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire. Based on these theories, different approaches to interreligious education for the contemporary religiously pluralistic society will be discussed.

Interreligious Learning

Interreligious learning is an important and heated discipline for contemporary religious education in a multi-religious society. In most Myanmar churches, interreligious learning is still a controversial subject because of their preexisting theology of religious exclusivism. However, some academic religious institutions like Myanmar Institute of Theology have started implementing interreligious education and subjects in their curriculum, understanding that without interreligious engagement, building peace in Myanmar is not possible. According to Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, interreligious learning covers a wide range of religious education areas such as, “conceptual frameworks, processes and theories from religious education, religious studies, multicultural education, racial and ethnic studies, women’s studies, and public policy studies.”² To eradicate misunderstandings among different religions through helping participants learn about other religions and their traditions is an important aim of interreligious learning.

Another vital aim of is to heal existing traumas of a certain religious people from their past life experience. Many Christians, Muslims, and other religious minorities in Myanmar have been physically and mentally traumatized by the Burmese military, Buddhist extremists, and

² Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders*, 2.

civil wars. Thus, many people of religious minorities have negative impression toward Buddhists in the country. Interreligious learning is the key to heal this type of religious prejudice.

Interreligious education is inherently ongoing education which must be structured appropriately in order to achieve the goal of building mutual understanding among different religions and building peace in the multi-religious society. In the following section, I will revisit the educational philosophies and theories of Alfred N. Whitehead and Paulo Freire, which I affirm are the foundations for a liberative education system. I argue that these theories should serve as the basis for all kinds of education. Whitehead's central idea about education is to produce wise persons who can practically utilize the knowledge they learn in their lives. Freire proposed an educational theory based on the pedagogy of the oppressed that is "critical pedagogy" or "problem-posing" instead of "banking education."

Alfred North Whitehead and his Educational Theory

Alfred North Whitehead is a well-known philosopher who has contributed invaluable insights for the field of education. Whitehead's relational concept of educational processes is clear and practical. It is rooted in his formulation of learning through a rhythmic cycle of three stages: romance, precision, and generalization.³ He describes the three stages of learning using how children learn to speak. The first stage, romance, is "the stage of first apprehension."⁴ Romance begins with wonder and develops a wondering nature like children who start learning new vocabulary words and asking many questions, collecting information with excitement and wonder. George Allan states that Whitehead's first stage, has a predisposition which not only includes "apprehension, appreciation, and interest" but also "iteration" until they become "habits

³ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Free Press, 1929), 15.

⁴ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 17.

of the hearts and mind.”⁵ Allan further explained that a predisposition is a habit, and thus the most important task of a teacher in classrooms at every level is helping students develop a habit of being curious.⁶

In the first stage, the knowledge is “not dominated by systematic procedure,” but it is a romantic emotion which is “essentially the excitement consequent on the transition from the bare facts to the first realisations of the import of their unexplored relationships,”⁷ and it leads to the second stage, a stage of precision in which they have to learn grammar systematically with rules and regulation.

The second stage is one of discipline in which, to go back to the children learning to speak example, they learn to carefully analyze their first information. Without the previous experience of romance, the second stage of precision would be barren and it would be, “a serious of meaningless statements about bare facts, produced artificially and without any further relevance.”⁸ And although the first stage is important, it would be meaningless if it does not give way to precision. For instance, in Myanmar’s education system, students are given textbook knowledge written and formulated by a group of people, but they are restricted from critically analyzing that knowledge. Thus, the lessons they learn from the school cannot be applied to their daily life in society and that becomes useless for the society. As Whitehead stated: “To a large extent book-learning conveys second-hand information, and as such can never rise to the

⁵ George Allan, *Modes of Learning: Whitehead’s Metaphysics and the Stages of Education* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 15.

⁶ Allan, *Modes of Learning*, 15.

⁷ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 18.

⁸ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 18.

importance of immediate practice.”⁹ The second stage is a shift in learning from one rooted in excitement and wonders to one that is critical and analytic. Allan lists four simple steps that Descartes proposed as a method for precision: (1) Identify which means never to accept anything as true unless it is identified evidently and clearly, (2) Analyze which is to divide each of the difficulties we encountered into, (3) Synthesize which means “think in an orderly fashion,” moving from the “simplest and easiest to understand to what is more complex” and (4) Check or examine the work which is to “make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general,” that “nothing was omitted.”¹⁰ Precision involves not only specifying what a fact is or is not, but specifying its relationship with other facts, as it provides “both a disclosure and an analysis of the general subject-matter of romance.”¹¹

The second stage directs a person to the third, the more abstract realm of generalization, which will lead them to discover even more wonders and possibilities. It is “a return to romanticism with added advantage of classified ideas and relevant technique.”¹² As one moves beyond romance and precision into generalization, earlier enthusiasms become more subtle, complicated, and conflicted than before. The more wonders and possibilities are discovered in this stage, the more imagination and ideas are developed. According to Allan, in the stage of generalization, “Theories cease to be uninterpreted abstractions, serving instead as instruments for guiding our understanding and hence our action, making it possible for us to identify ends

⁹ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 51.

¹⁰ Allan, *Modes of Learning*, 18.

¹¹ Allan, *Modes of Learning*, 21; Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 19.

¹² Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 18.

worth pursuing and then effectively to achieve those ends.”¹³ Generalization is “active mastery” of knowledge, “as to transform every phase of immediate experience.”¹⁴ It is the habit with which everyone should engage with the world. These three stages must continuously repeat in the educational process of every student.

Imagination is the most important part of Whitehead’s education process. According to Whitehead, without imagination, knowledge cannot be transformed to connecting with practical lives. Education system must be planned with the “imaginative consideration of learning” which “imparts information imaginatively.”¹⁵ In every stage of the learning cycle freedom of imagination must be given to everyone. Students must be given freedom to create their own ideas and use their imagination to connect what they learn from their teachers to their everyday lives. Every field of study has been inherited by one culture from another, one generation from another, but it is important that information be taught in ways applicable to the present time. As Whitehead says, knowledge will be meaningless if there is no connection with our daily life.¹⁶ He continues, “Education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is, above all things, harmful.”¹⁷ He also states that “education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge.”¹⁸ Whitehead’s vision for education is not only for schools and universities but asserts that what is taught in schools should become the basis for the whole society.

¹³ Allan, *Modes of Learning*, 26.

¹⁴ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 32.

¹⁵ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 93.

¹⁶ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 93.

¹⁷ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 1, 2.

¹⁸ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 4.

The main goal of Whitehead's educational theory is to produce wise people who have wisdom to handle their learned knowledge and to apply it to their daily life. Whitehead maintains that teaching students many subjects superficially can be dangerous for society: "To a large extent book-learning conveys second-hand information, and as such can never rise to the importance of immediate practice."¹⁹ For him, the aim of education is to construct society and therefore, if education is knowledge without practicing, it can do no good to society: "The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience."²⁰ Knowledge spreads from generation to generation and into the society. Therefore, he emphasizes the importance of having skilled teachers, since they are responsible for imparting knowledge down to the students.

The idea of connecting knowledge and experience is supported by John Dewey. John Dewey is an education theorist who formulated an educational plan that is committed to framing and adopting the "philosophy of experience."²¹ He approached education as the connection between theory and experience which is important for interreligious learning as well. According to Brian Hendley, Dewey maintains that rather than separating theory from the practice, they must be brought together in order to get "result in a more viable, realistic set of ideas and principles of education as well as give direction and guidance to our day-to-day educational activities."²²

There is a very profound relationship between education and research which promotes the imaginative education of an institution. Teachers must do more research in their fields of

¹⁹ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 51.

²⁰ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 93.

²¹ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 51.

²² Brian Patrick Hendley, *Dewey, Russell, Whitehead: Philosophers as Educators* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 15.

expertise in order to cultivate and activate students' creativity in the learning process. For example, in Sunday School, even though we use the Bible as our text – which has been used throughout the ages – teachers must be trained to think critically about the scriptures and make them come alive and relevant for their students instead of simply telling them memorize Bible passages and learn some Christian songs. In Myanmar, we have been lacking this culture of student-teacher relationship. Instead, students have always been under the unilateral power of teachers and thus, the education can never become imaginative. This top-down or hierarchical system in education is seen in the religious education of every religion. Church members are to obey and listen to what pastors and church elders have said and preached. The system we need today, and for which students now are fighting, is the education that connects imagination and practical life together.

Paulo Freire: Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire is one of the most influential philosophers of education in the twentieth century. He advanced critical theory and pedagogy to eradicate illiteracy among people who have been oppressed by colonialism. His theory is rooted in socially and politically oppressed people. He was influenced by John Dewey's philosophy of education, particularly in the classroom dynamics between the teachers and students. Like Dewey, he advocated that each student has an active role in their learning instead of being the passive recipients of knowledge. They both belief the teacher-student relationship should be open-minded and confident, creating an environment where both students and teachers feel comfortable sharing with and learning from each other.²³ Freire “entwined theory and reflective practice as praxis. He claimed that a

²³ Kim Díaz, “Paulo Freire (1921–1997),” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://iep.utm.edu/freire/#H12>.

society's potential for ethical development lay in the degree of awareness of education's potential to recreate rather than mere replicate society.”²⁴

Humanization is the struggle to be accepted as a human being in society. Freire gives pedagogy for education by explaining the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors. He calls it, “pedagogy of the oppressed as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy.” It has two distinct stages:

The first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.²⁵

Freire discusses two types of education systems: banking and problem posing education. Banking education is the kind of pedagogy that limits an understanding of social justice and blocks students from thinking critically. This form of education deposits ready-made knowledge into the minds of students. Students are forced to believe that teachers are the ones who possess all answers and that they themselves are ignorant and in need of their teachers' knowledge and help.²⁶ They are not given a chance to analyze what they're being taught, but told to accept everything uncritically. These students are “encouraged to bank a certain kind of educational capital in order to procure stable jobs with fair wages and benefits when they graduate. And those who challenge the conditions of their oppression may face punishment.”²⁷ The banking approach to education reinforces existing social inequalities, leaving some students with more

²⁴ Cathy Byrne, “Freirean Critical Pedagogy's Challenge to Interfaith Education: What Is Interfaith? What Is Education?” *British Journal of Religious Education* 33, no. 1 (January 2011): 47.

²⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000), 54.

²⁶ Díaz, “Paulo Freire.”

²⁷ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 7.

opportunities than others. The struggle for a quality and equal public education by the poor and marginalized is still an ongoing effort even in the US education system.²⁸ This is exactly what happened in Myanmar's education system when the military regime was in power. Students had no right to question their teachers. Likewise, the Myanmar people as a whole did not have rights to question the authority. Those who did challenge the authority were punished cruelty.

The banking approach to education is also unfortunately found in the religious community. Most ethnic Christians in Myanmar were converted to Christianity through missionaries from the West. Christian converts were taught to accept themselves as heathens who needed to accept the new religion which was superior to them. They were taught that the way they worshipped god was wrong and therefore, they had to adopt Christianity and leave behind all their ethnic traditions. They were taught that they knew nothing about god and therefore, needed to listen to all they taught. In most local churches, children are taught in the same way the first missionaries taught their ancestors. Christians in Myanmar are very much used to readymade doctrines and teachings, but for Freire, "for apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human."²⁹ He provides an alternative pedagogy called *critical pedagogy* which rests on dialogue, a way of "critically analyzing" knowledge by posing questions and solving problems. Here, Freire emphasizes dialogue, which he says can cease "the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher" and instead develop "teacher-student with students-teachers."³⁰ Freire prefers dialogue which is based on love and respect that allows us to engage in conversation. In order to promote dialogue and interactions between people,

²⁸ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 7.

²⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.

³⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.

Freire suggests that “teachers problematize the issue being discussed.”³¹ As critical thinking is the most important process of education, Freire claimed that such thinking “recognizes not only the possibility of making a new choice... but also the right to do so.”³² Collins and Bilge acknowledged that developing critical consciousness of “how the interdependent dimensions of one’s own life” and “how intersecting systems of power” in society can be life changing and result in powerful perspectives on social inequality.³³

Another core pedagogical feature of Freire’s educational process is to engage with the oppressed. The oppressed must take first initiative in the liberation process because according to Freire, the oppressed are the ones who best understand the necessity of liberation for they themselves suffer.³⁴ On the other hand, it is very important that educators do not become oppressors and try to make students believe that their teachers know everything. Instead, they should encourage their students and emphasize that they themselves can also teach their teachers. In Myanmar, in order to get independence from the British colonial rule, a young man General Aung San and his friends started a revolution. Unfortunately, Aung San and his fellow friends were assassinated in 1947 and U Nu was delegated in place of Aung San. In 1948, Burma was declared independence. In 1962, U Ne Win, the first dictator of the country, took the power. Since then, the country has significantly declined into the worst situation for politics, economics, and education. It was true in Burma that the revolution was started by the oppressed but later, the oppressed, as Freire states, “instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become

³¹ Díaz, “Paulo Freire.”

³² Byrne, “Freirean Challenge to Interfaith Education,” 50.

³³ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 7.

³⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.

oppressors.”³⁵ Here, Freire is concerned that “the oppressed must not become in turn oppressors of the oppressors but rather restorers of the humanity of both.”³⁶ But in the case of Myanmar, the military dictatorship has become the main oppressor. For them, as Freire says, “to be men is to be oppressors.”³⁷ For oppressors, “the existence of the oppressed is necessary to their own existence.”³⁸ Therefore, the Burmese military government continuously controls people with their power so that their own family members can continue to survive.

Freire points out the problem of ignorance on the side of both the oppressed and the oppressors. Both, he says, are “manifestations of dehumanization” and both the oppressed and oppressors need to be liberated.³⁹ For the process of humanization, the oppressed must realize that they are human beings who have ability to liberate themselves and the oppressors.

Throughout his writings, Freire advocated that “the ontological vocation of all human beings is to become more human.”⁴⁰ This realization is “a radical requirement,” that will develop the desire for liberation.⁴¹ For instance, the education system in Burma has been corrupted since 1962 in that the whole curriculum has been controlled by the military government. They would not teach students the truth about the history of the country because they feared losing their power. Therefore, in order to sustain their power, they controlled education. However, there have always been some students who realized that they are fully human beings and have led a

³⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 45.

³⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 44.

³⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 45.

³⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 58.

³⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 48.

⁴⁰ Díaz, “Paulo Freire.”

⁴¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 68.

revolution against the system. Kwok-Pui-lan, in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, says that it is important for religious educators to educate students with religious transnational literacy because, “theology grows out from lived experience and a particular context.”⁴² It is vital for teachers to recognize different students from different backgrounds in the classroom and to give credit for their different experiences. We are in the 21st century where we cannot ignore racial and ethnic minority experiences in the classroom like in a traditional and Eurocentric theology class. From a global perspective, the experiences of religious and ethnic minority students become “authentic” for their cultures and therefore, it is also important for teachers to prepare “the power dynamic shaping in the class and offer guidelines.”⁴³ Freire’s critical pedagogy helps religious educators empower to lift up the human dignity of students who come from an oppressed background.

Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical race theory (CRT) was first used in the legal system as a means to prove how the field of law perpetuated the supremacy of Whites in American society. According to Marvin Lynn and Lawrence Parker, the aforementioned description of CRT as a critique of racism in the law and society emerged as a race-based critique growing from the National Critical Legal Studies conferences that took place at the Harvard and UC-Berkeley Law schools in the early to mid-1980s.⁴⁴ A group of law professors and students criticized how the real effects of the law

⁴² Kwok, “Teaching Theology,” 25.

⁴³ Kwok, “Teaching Theology,” 26.

⁴⁴ Marvin Lynn and Laurence Parker, “Critical Race Studies in Education: Examining a Decade of Research on U.S. Schools,” *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education* 38, no. 4 (November 2006): 257, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11256-006-0035-5>.

served to privilege the wealthy and powerful in the US while ignoring the rights of the poor to use the courts as a means of redress.

Lynn and Parker state that first generation scholars of critical race theory such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Williams, and Angela Harris focused mainly on the material manifestations of racism.⁴⁵ Second-generation scholars have taken the ideas of first-generation scholars and extended them to address other issues of discrimination and oppression in the wider society, including gender, class, ethnicity, language, culture, and sexuality. This new direction of CRT discusses how CRT as a legal framework of analysis interfaces with concepts of identity, the impact of globalization on understandings about race, critical post-colonial thought on race and racism, critical race activism, and the development of coalitions across differences. CRT scholars have explored how critical race studies in the law can specifically be applied to studies of race and education. Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, and Lynn are the ones who link the origins of CRT and educational literature beyond legal discourse to many other disciplines such as ethnic studies, feminism, and cultural nationalism.

Critical race theory can be used to treat the unfair education system in Myanmar because CRT not only deals with racial issues, but also talks about gender, class, and other forms of subordination and oppression. Lynn and Parker say that “CRT studies in education is multi-disciplinary in its origins, grounded in its legal critique as well as borrowing partly from diverse traditions in education as well as multiculturalism and multicultural education.”⁴⁶ Even though CRT was born in the US context to stand against the racism faced by Black people, it has been used widely in different fields to challenge other forms of discrimination.

⁴⁵ Lynn and Parker, “Critical Race Studies in Education,” 257.

⁴⁶ Lynn and Parker, “Critical Race Studies in Education,” 258.

In education, this theory continues to serve its traditional role of questioning and demolishing prevailing perceptions of fairness, meritocracy, color-blindness, and neutrality in the education of racial minorities. Daniel G. Solórzano defines critical race theory as the work of scholars who are attempting to develop an explanatory framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in education and that works toward identifying and challenging racism as part of a larger goal of identifying and challenging all forms of subordination.⁴⁷ Critical race theory would be an effective framework not only in criticizing the traditional education system in Myanmar, but also in the development of a greater understanding of the social and historical circumstances of how Myanmar people are oppressed in the country and how this categorization affects their academic experiences and success.

In order to promote education in Myanmar, scholars have to name the injuries students have suffered under the oppressive government, identify their origins, and find remedies for the injuries in the same way CRT does in the Freirean tradition. CRT challenges deficit thinking in education. For example, in his article “Conceptualizing the Notion of Deficit Thinking,” Richard R. Valencia regards the concept of the model minority as deficit thinking which silences the voice of the unprivileged people.⁴⁸ Valencia gives a clear description of deficit thinking, saying it “is a brutal form of oppression as it thwarts human development” and that educators and policy makers should be careful in their thoughts and practices around the educational system.⁴⁹ Deficit thinking takes the position that minority or poor students and families are at fault for their poor

⁴⁷ Daniel G. Solórzano, “Critical Race Theory, Race and Gender Microaggressions, and the Experience of Chicana and Chicano Scholars,” *Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, no. 1 (1998): 121-136.

⁴⁸ Richard R. Valencia, “Conceptualizing the Notion of Deficit Thinking,” in *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*, ed. Richard R. Valencia (Washington, DC: Falmer Press, 1997), 3.

⁴⁹ Valencia, “Notion of Deficit Thinking,” 3.

academic performances because they enter the schools without the normative cultural knowledge and skills and parents do not value and support their children's education. In response, Freire challenges educators to promote and cultivate the skills and academic abilities of their students just as CRT calls educators to address the counter-narratives of the oppressed and to work toward the elimination of all forms of oppression.

When applying CRT in our education system, one of the most important things to consider is that, as both Derrick Bell and Paulo Freire affirm, the CRT text cannot be applied to the Myanmar's educational context without rewriting and reinventing it for this context.⁵⁰ Freire states in his conversation with Donaldo Macedo that "it is impossible to export pedagogical practices without re-inventing them."⁵¹ Therefore, contextual studies is an important part of CRT (especially when the education department and educators are responsible for creating and approving class curriculum) in order to effectively make the connection between theory and practice. Freire repeatedly emphasizes that his pedagogy is not transferrable across contexts but rather should be modified for the particular context of teaching and learning it is being used in. He also encourages educators to listen to their students and build on their knowledge and experiences in order to engage in contextualized, dynamic, and personalized educational approaches that further the goals of humanization and social transformation.

Contemporary Approaches to Interreligious Education

Religion has been, in many ways, oppressed and used as a tool to oppress people in Myanmar. Buddhism is used to oppress minority religions and Myanmar Christians use their

⁵⁰ Daniel G. Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory's Intellectual Roots: My Email Epistolary with Derrick Bell," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, ed. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixon (New York: Routledge, 2013), 48-68; Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1987).

⁵¹ Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*, 61.

religion to defend their oppressive practices. Both Whitehead and Freire viewed education as the heart of civil society. Interreligious education, like religious pluralism, is a response to religious diversity and emerging conflicts in the religiously diverse society. Interreligious education helps us to see religion as a source of peacebuilding and solidarity.

Interreligious Learning and Critical Theory

Religious literacy alone is not enough to create a healthy and functioning religiously pluralistic community. We must also learn effective ways to critically communicate and collaborate across religious differences. Critical construction of interreligious pedagogy is vital for interreligious learning in order to engage with an appreciable knowledge of religious pluralism and to build relationships among religious differences, both of which contribute to the peacebuilding process. One of the most profound themes in critical theory is to question how power is constructed in education. It is important to acknowledge the need to identify the power held by the dominant religion and how this power is addressed within interreligious education. The power behind Myanmar public education had been in the hands of the military dictatorship. Educational policy makers and teachers were controlled and dominated by the ideologies of the dictators so that students became victims of the oppressors. Likewise, this kind of system is dominated in both Buddhism and Christianity. Certain religious groups have always held more power than others, and oftentimes their doctrines and theologies have sanctioned oppressive ideas and practices. Uncovering the biases and assumptions that inform and dominate our thinking, and recognizing the ways in which we might be participating in oppression and supremacy is a vital act of critical theory.⁵² T. Puett affirmed that critical pedagogy challenges “the power dynamics between the center and the margin in relations within and between

⁵² Puett, “On Transforming Our World,” 268.

religions and promotes a form of power grounded in relationships, mutual exchanges,” and “the capacity to accomplish together what one cannot accomplish alone.”⁵³ Critical theory in interreligious learning can benefit “a theoretical framework to aid in exploring the problematic aspects of religious traditions and relationship among religions, as well as elevating the promising resources religious traditions offer for building community and solidarity and working for constructive social change.”⁵⁴

Freire’s approach of critical theory was to help students promote the process of “conscientization,” which means to develop a critical understanding of their social problems and reality by analyzing and reflecting the root cause of oppression in the society, which is generally regarded as the foundational text of his approach.⁵⁵ Bell hooks has well seconded the critical theory approach in her teaching. She emphasizes that “self-actualization” is crucial part for every leader and asserts that “ professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better to create pedagogical practices that engage student, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply.”⁵⁶ Critical pedagogy seeks “to promote educational experiences that are transformative, empowering, transgressive, and even subversive.”⁵⁷ In interreligious learning and encountering, both educators and students must learn to observe with open-mindedness and respect while critically analyzing what they learn in light of their current context and existing knowledge society. Like CRT, critical theory is an

⁵³ Puett, “On Transforming Our World,” 268.

⁵⁴ Puett, “On Transforming Our World,” 269.

⁵⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

⁵⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 22.

⁵⁷ Puett, “On Transforming Our World,” 269.

effective framework for interreligious education for the development of a greater understanding of different religious traditions and a more genuine engagement with other religions. All this will positively affect peacebuilding efforts in a multi-religious society.

Multi-religious Learning and Interreligious Learning

There are two approaches discussed in religious pedagogy on religious education: multi-religious learning and interreligious learning. Multi-religious learning is effective in tackling the problem of religious literacy and religious tolerance, both of which are important for the multi-religious community. According to Marianne Moyaert, “Teaching religious literacy is more often connected with the pedagogical approach of multi-religious learning.”⁵⁸ In the multi-religious learning approach, “the central focus is on the introduction to and the comparison of various religious perspectives, all of which formulate their own answers to the questions about God, the human being, and the world.”⁵⁹ The aim of this approach is to achieve “a possibly objective survey of the contents and forms of expression of the religions.”⁶⁰ This learning is well fitted for the academic world where religious differences and similarities are openly explored within comparative religious studies. Multi-religious learning creates “the impression that religions and worldviews are interesting as historical and cultural phenomena.”⁶¹ Most seminaries in Myanmar have engaged with multi-religious learning by teaching about other religions inside World Major Religion courses. In most cases, these kinds of courses can provide a good overview of various religious traditions, but when educators lack interreligious knowledge, they may also lack a

⁵⁸ Moyaert, “On the Role of Ritual,” 50.

⁵⁹ Moyaert. “On the Role of Ritual,” 50.

⁶⁰ Hans-Georg Ziebertz, “Religious Pluralism and Religious Education,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 6, no. 2 (1993): 86, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157092593X00135>.

⁶¹ Moyaert, “On the Role of Ritual,” 50.

sense of objectivity. This is dangerous because it makes it more likely that they will promote their religious prejudice toward other religions while they are teaching.

Building a harmonious multi-religious community requires going beyond overcoming religious prejudices and this is where interreligious learning comes in. Interreligious learning goes beyond multi-religious learning in that it “fosters and enhances interreligious literacy, the ability to sensitively and effectively relate across religious differences.”⁶² Interreligious literacy is a prerequisite and a critical component in understanding discourses of diverse religious and social environments. Like most learnings, text is primary component for interreligious classes. Texts help students learn differences and commonalities, strengths and weaknesses among different religions. They also provide a platform that gives students “a human face to the other beyond stereotypes.”⁶³ Along with texts, encountering ritual practices, religious symbols, and visiting religious places is crucial in order to develop a deep understanding and appreciation of different religions. A willingness to engage with people of other religious traditions must supplement interreligious literacy in order to build a meaningful religious community. Interacting with others promotes meaningful relationships through personal involvement. Interreligious learning is a “competency-oriented education: it aims at developing the competencies needed to engage religious diversity.”⁶⁴

There are three basic ways to measure religious diversity.⁶⁵ The first and most commonly used category is attitude toward other religions. The second is relationship with people of other

⁶² Moyaert, “On the Role of Ritual,” 51.

⁶³ Moyaert, “On the Role of Ritual,” 55.

⁶⁴ Moyaert, “On the Role of Ritual,” 52.

⁶⁵ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 77.

religions. Kujawa-Holbrook stresses that “learners must be religiously literate and capable of forming relationship with individuals, families and communities” to build stronger and supportive community of religious diversity.⁶⁶ The third is knowledge about other religions. It is important to learn and have knowledge about one’s own religion and other religions for interreligious learning. Beyond this knowledge, one must, as Whitehead and Dewey would insist, have encounters with those of other religions and apply their knowledge to their own life and cultural context. One must not only learn about the beliefs and practices, but also learn to understand and reflect on how the knowledge can be related and applied to real life experiences.

Intersectionality and Interreligious Learning

Intersectionality is important because interreligious education needs to consider not only religious differences, but also other human differences such as ethnicity, languages, social status, economic status, and cultural differences. Intersectionality was proposed initially by Kimberlé Crenshaw to analyze the multiple and overlapping discrimination experienced by African-American women in the United States.⁶⁷ When claiming the legal rights of African-American women, they were forced to choose just one of their identities: race or gender. Crenshaw argues that being both Black and female is not something that can be separated into “Black” and “female.” These two things are intertwined within a person’s identity.⁶⁸ All aspects of one’s identity must be considered as concurrently interacting with each other and affecting one’s perception within a society.⁶⁹ Intersectionality not only points out that each person has different

⁶⁶ Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders*, 3.

⁶⁷ Edvina Bešić, “Intersectionality: A Pathway towards Inclusive Education?” *Prospects* 49 (March 2020): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09461-6>.

⁶⁸ Bešić, “Intersectionality,” 113.

⁶⁹ Bešić, “Intersectionality,” 114.

intersecting identities, but it also explains how those identities are excluded even within the same group. According to Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience.”⁷⁰ It is an important analytic tool for interreligious education because it “give people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.”⁷¹ Collins and Bilge state,

The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.⁷²

Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook affirms that intersectionality “considers multiple social identities that shape individual and collective experiences of oppression and privilege within hierarchical systems of power.”⁷³ Intersectionality becomes important for interreligious engagement because every person experiences social power differently based on their own social context and intersectionality explains how social divisions of race, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others, positions people differently in the world.⁷⁴ Social inequality amidst different ethnic groups in Myanmar has a huge impact on the education system. Poor people and minority ethnic groups get poorer education or, in some cases, no education at all. Using intersectionality as an

⁷⁰ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 1.

⁷¹ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 1.

⁷² Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 1.

⁷³ Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, “Intersectionality and Interreligious Engagement: A Reflection,” in *Deep Understanding for Divisive Times: Essays Marking a Decade of the “Journal of Interreligious Studies”*, ed. Lucinda Allen Mosher et al. (Newton Centre, MA: Interreligious Studies Press, 2020), 18.

⁷⁴ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 1.

analytic tool focuses on the impact of “social institutions in shaping and solving social problem.”⁷⁵

Intersectionality and critical education are interconnected because they both focus on social inequality and deal with the ways power is abused to solve social problems in society. Critical theory challenges educators to formulate constructive knowledge that confronts and resists oppressive social power in the education system. According to Collins and Bilge, historically, intersectionality and critical education share three similarities: (1) both areas draw from broader philosophical traditions of participatory democracy; (2) both work primarily in schooling and formal education as one primary institutional location for their praxis; and (3) they both state that navigating differences is an important part of developing a critical consciousness.⁷⁶ The education system in Myanmar has been corrupted since the beginning of the military dictatorship in the country. The school curriculum system as a whole had been discriminatory. Myanmar people were not given freedom to even imagine and use their own creativity. They were forced to learn what their dictators wanted to indoctrinate them with. Both teachers and students were oppressed by a handful of dictators. They had never been given freedom to learn in the both the classroom as well as in the society. As the country has moved toward democracy since 2010, education in Myanmar has changed, becoming a slightly more open-minded learning system, but there are still many challenges that need to be overcome. Among these is gap in educational opportunities for rich students versus poor ones. The present government still struggles with a lack of investment in the education system. Thus, schools often

⁷⁵ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 1.

⁷⁶ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, chapter 7.

need to charge students a range of unofficial fees to cover their costs. Many families, particularly poor ones, cannot afford these fees, nor do they have money for tutoring outside the classroom. Poor students, most of them belonging to ethnic minorities, are left behind in government and public schools, where the school curriculum learning system remains the same as the former ways, whereas the rich students get more opportunities at their expensive private schools to learn and excel since they have tutors available and better quality textbooks and other resources. Most ethnic minorities live in the rural areas of the country where the education system operates on a much smaller budget than those in the cities. Social inequality between the rich and the poor, the majority and the minority, the powerful and the powerless, in Myanmar has drastically impacted the education system in the country, but incorporating intersectionality can help solve the problems it faces. According to Anna Carastathis, “Properly recontextualized, intersectionality represents the condensation of social-movement and critical academic knowledges, motivated by insurrectionary intensions, transformative visions, and collective struggles.”⁷⁷ Intersectionality helps analyze social inequality in society and how power relations are intertwined within the education system.

Intersectionality is a powerful analytic tool for tracing the radical gaps in the traditional and progressive education system in Myanmar based on the diverse social-status.

“Intersectionality within interreligious encounters makes systemic inequalities visible.”⁷⁸

Kujawa-Holbrook gives an example of Omid Sami, professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at Duke University that in sharing radically differences in interfaith work, “there are

⁷⁷ Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), chapter 1, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁷⁸ Kujawa-Holbrook, “Intersectionality and Interreligious Engagement,” 19.

fundamental structural inequalities that shape the parameters in which this conversation take place.”⁷⁹ According to Kujawa-Holbrook, “Identity formation is a spiritual issue, and when positive formation is neglected, a common response is to view religious differences (or other social identities) as a threat, with the resultant identities formed in opposition or “over against” the other.”⁸⁰

When participating in interreligious engagement, participants represent not only their religion(s), but also their race, social status, their education background, and their gender. Najeeba Syeed suggests that interreligious educators should aim to bring students, and all aspects of their identity, into the classroom.⁸¹ Even though, in Myanmar, participants are from the same country, each person’s identities are different based on their ethnicity, religious tradition(s), location, and social status. Every piece of their identity should be involved in the process of interreligious education. Therefore, in order to understand participants, one must be willing to learn about each piece that makes another person who they are. Understanding someone’s faith requires understanding how it is embodied in their experience of being part of the race, social status, or gender they belong to. Our religious identity and our faith are interwoven into the fabric of our other identities. Intersectionality shows us how to include all aspects of a person’s identity during interreligious engagement and encourages that it is okay to still be ourselves while being, for example, a Christian, a Lisu woman, and a Myanmar citizen. Therefore, interreligious and religious educators must pay attention to the diversity within their religious tradition. Intersectionality nurtures a holistic concern for the whole human society as it

⁷⁹ Kujawa-Holbrook, “Intersectionality and Interreligious Engagement,” 19.

⁸⁰ Kujawa-Holbrook, “Intersectionality and Interreligious Engagement,” 20.

⁸¹ Najeeba Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” in *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion: Embodying Knowledge*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan (Cham, Switz.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 173.

“embraces whole persons in their communities.”⁸² “Intersectionality is focused on real people’s lives and concerned about creating space for new perspectives and experiences.”⁸³

Edvina Besic’ work lies at the intersection of inclusive education and intersectionality. In relation to the goal of inclusive education, which is “to open access to a wide range of educational and social opportunities for all children, regardless of their position in society,” intersectionality is used to emphasize the experience of marginalization and discrimination of oppressed students, not only at the individual level, but also at the institutional level.⁸⁴ Buddhism in Myanmar has a leading role in standing against social and political injustice throughout history. Najeeba Syeed states that “in times of state violence and structural inequity, religion can animate resistance and provide a fertile ground” for activism.⁸⁵ The Saffron Revolution in 2007, led by Buddhist monks against the political injustice in Myanmar, was a historic revolution in Myanmar history. Despite brutal attack and killing of the military junta, Buddhist monks led the people of different ages, social status, and religions in protesting against the military for the oppressive system. Intersectionality is used in the field of interreligious learning to analyze the systemic oppression in society as a whole. Even though, interreligious engagement that applies intersectionality will not be “a comfortable place,” it can become “a scared space,” and “opportunity to create communities that welcome differences, push boundaries, and re-examine systemic inequality.”⁸⁶

⁸² Kujawa-Holbrook, “Intersectionality and Interreligious Engagement,”

⁸³ Kujawa-Holbrook, “Intersectionality and Interreligious Engagement,”

⁸⁴ Bešić, “Intersectionality,” 112.

⁸⁵ Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” 179.

⁸⁶ Kujawa-Holbrook, “Intersectionality and Interreligious Engagement,”

Interreligious educators must learn “how to navigate across multiple religious traditions beyond theologies of religious pluralisms and receive training on how to hold actions, teach-ins, and other forms of religious education based on complex problems facing humanity.”⁸⁷

Interreligious educators have to be “deeply authentic and contextually adept as a scholar” in both his or her own tradition and cultural context and in the global context.⁸⁸ Interreligious education must cover the wide range of communities “across time and space,” drawing together religious texts and past stories of freedom and liberation.⁸⁹ For Syeed, language, culture, and experiences, including trauma students may have suffered, are the issues that interreligious educators must cover. She says, “how we teach is as important as what we teach.”⁹⁰ In order for effective interreligious learning, “we must pay attention to the co-existence and cross-fertilization of religions and cultures, including songs and dances.”⁹¹ Intersectionality in interreligious education can help interreligious educators create classrooms that are a space not only to learn and experience other religious traditions, but also a place for students to recover from any trauma they have experienced in their past.

Interreligious Learning and Spirituality

Interreligious education should cultivate the spirituality and help people grow into a greater understanding of human spirituality. Interreligious learning is always spiritual and sacred because religious experiences are intertwined with spiritual experiences. According to Robert

⁸⁷ Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” 180.

⁸⁸ Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” 172.

⁸⁹ Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” 173.

⁹⁰ Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” 173.

⁹¹ Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” 175.

Nash and Monique Swaby, “Religion is head and spirituality is heart,” and therefore religion and spirituality cannot be separated.⁹² Don Baker defines spirituality as “attitudes and actions” which are based on “the belief that are invisible forces more powerful than we are and that through interaction with those forces we can better ourselves or make our lives more pleasant or meaningful.”⁹³ So, spirituality is not just meditating but also the act of using the insights one has gained during meditation to create a better society and world.

Kujawa-Holbrook clearly states that “the quality of interreligious encounter is directly linked to the spiritual maturity.”⁹⁴ One’s spiritual maturity depends on their openness to the divine spirituality, which includes the knowledge and wisdom present in different religious traditions. The role of an educator in the interreligious learning process is to empower student’s spirituality by helping them participate in religious dialogue and religious activities.

Sharing personal stories and experiences, Kujawa-Holbrook notes, should be the starting point and the center of interreligious learning.⁹⁵ Interreligious learning enriches participants’ spirituality by allowing them to encounter each other’s spiritual experiences through their personal stories. Actively listening to these stories is as important to the spiritual growth process as sharing our own personal religious experiences. Elizabeth Lieberts affirms that “Spiritual direction involves hearing.”⁹⁶ According to Liebert, “Spiritual direction elicits from both the

⁹² Robert J. Nash and Monique Swaby, “Helping College Students Discover Meaning through Spirituality,” in *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies*, ed. Heewon Chang and Drick Boyd (London: Routledge, 2016), 117.

⁹³ Don Baker, *Korean Spirituality* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 5.

⁹⁴ Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders*, 40.

⁹⁵ Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders*, 2.

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, expanded ed. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 7.

spiritual director and the seeker particular modes of seeing, hearing, naming, responding, celebrating and acting.”⁹⁷

The spirituality of interreligious learning can be closely related to process theology. Moore says, “process theology is an organic theology.”⁹⁸ According to process philosophy: (1) all things flow, (2) all things are connected, (3) all things are both subjects and objects, and (4) all things have value for itself and for others because they are connected to each other.⁹⁹ Process theology is one way to help today’s Christians experience a spiritual transformation. Based on this philosophy, Process theology allows us to ask difficult questions about the Christian faith such as God’s presence in the midst of suffering and God’s love and human responsibility. The traditional methods for teaching Christian religious education lacks this openness to asking difficult questions and instead is more a form of indoctrination. According to John Marcus Sweeney, “in indoctrination, truth is hidden.”¹⁰⁰ God is kept in a box so that people do not experience God outside the church. For instance, Christians in Myanmar are forbidden to learn about God outside of Christianity. In contrast, process theology leads people think about God more broadly as the one who is present among all creation.

In traditional teachings, God is understood as love, but He holds the power, *unilateral power*, to control all His creation.¹⁰¹ He is always above everything. This idea is derived from

⁹⁷ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns*, 8.

⁹⁸ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching from the Heart* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 15.

⁹⁹ Timothy Murphy, Religious Education and Process Theology in Faith Communities (class lecture, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, Spring 2015).

¹⁰⁰ John Marcus Sweeney, *I’d Rather Be Dead Than Be a Girl: Implications of Whitehead, Whorf, and Piaget for Inclusive Language in Religious Education* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 13.

¹⁰¹ C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993), 27.

Aristotle's belief that "God has perfect unilateral power, and who described God as the "Unmoved Mover."¹⁰² This concept of controlling others with power is simply taken by some Myanmar Christians to accept and allow the dictatorship of the military government in Myanmar and all other oppressive system in the country without further critical thinking. Process theology rejects all substantial thinking that isolates someone from relationship (both with God and others) and focuses on the relational power of pluralism which is fundamental to the spirituality of interreligious education.

Being religiously fluid himself, Duane Bidwell stresses that participating in multiple religions is what forms his own spirituality. For him, spirituality is a pathway to relate to the divine Mystery through different religious practices such as ritual, prayers, beliefs, values, commitment to the religious teaching, and connection to the meaning of life.¹⁰³ He described two kinds of spirituality: "normal spirituality" and "exceptional spirituality." Normal spirituality leans on only one religion and exceptional spirituality does not need to fit into one particular religion.¹⁰⁴ Interreligious learning leads to the exceptional spirituality which "values and celebrates multiple religious voices in one person despite conflicting beliefs and doctrines."¹⁰⁵ Phan states that "The God-talk in Asia must be pluralistic,"¹⁰⁶ and spirituality in Asia must be as well because Asia is the birth place of many religions. Without interreligious encounters, spirituality cannot be spiritual in Asia. There is no "*spiritual monogamy*," even when when

¹⁰² Mesle, *Process Theology*, 33.

¹⁰³ Duane Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn't Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 6.

¹⁰⁴ Duane Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn't Enough*, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Duane Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn't Enough*, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), EBSCOhost, chapter 7.

someone identifies with a single particular religion because religious and spiritual practices are always shared and borrowed from each other without formal acknowledgment.¹⁰⁷ Being a person who practices two religions, Buddhism and Christianity, Paul Knitter says that the only way to be religious is by being interreligious.¹⁰⁸ People incorporate different practices from many religions to encounter the divine even when religious singularity is the standard. Interreligious education encourages a person to learn to be spiritual through encounters with different religious practices.

Conclusion

Interreligious education plays a vital role in building resilience and advocating for religious pluralism in society. Religious institutions have a responsibility to build “a strong society’s immunity and resilience against exclusion, discrimination and abuse of basic human individual and collective rights.”¹⁰⁹ Education has a profound impact on the development of each student, and it can either promote or prevent prejudice and tolerance. What is taught in the classroom will continue to stay with them and grow in the community. According to Christine Hong, the goal of religious educators is to help students transform and grow in ways that positively impact our world.¹¹⁰ In order to fulfill that goal, there is a need to investigate the challenges for promoting effective interreligious education, pedagogies, and practices in Myanmar’s current education system. The current religious education system that promotes

¹⁰⁷ Duane Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn’t Enough*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Richmond: Oneworld, 2013), 216.

¹⁰⁹ Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Smith, “Interreligious and Intercultural Education for Dialogue, Peace and Social Cohesion,” *International Review of Education* 62 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-016-9583-4>.

¹¹⁰ Christine J. Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 22.

religious triumphalism of the dominant religions in Myanmar, leading to discrimination, conflict, and violence, must also be reformed and decolonized. The next chapter focuses on decolonizing pedagogies and practices for interreligious education. Interreligious educators have a central role in promoting cultural and religious diversity by formulating relevant and effective pedagogies and practices for interreligious education, as this will lead to a peaceful multi-religious community.

Chapter 4

Pedagogies and Practices for Interreligious Education

Teaching and learning theory addresses the issues of learning within a diverse world, coming to understand and negotiate areas of human difference.

— Judith A. Berling

The idea of *interfaith* or *interreligious* has existed in Myanmar since the 1980s, when professor Khin Maung Din¹ questioned why a Buddhist should give up his faith and become a Christian in his paper presentation called “Can Buddhists Be Buddhist-Christians?”² Only after two decades though was Myanmar Institute of Theology able to actualize its interfaith programs through the hard work of some Burmese and ethnic theologians. Myanmar Institute of Theology connects pedagogy and content through creating multi-religious community, teaching, and learning about religions. In 2000, MIT started a liberal Arts program which is open to students of every religion. The school also started a new program of Master in interreligious studies in 2015 with ten students. Students are encouraged to participate in interfaith activities, both in school and society. This is how interreligious education has been introduced and developed within the educational realm, and especially at MIT, but there is a great need for interreligious education and activities to reach the grass root people who have to struggle for their daily life survival.

Successful interreligious education depends on good pedagogies and practices based on particular social context. There are several areas that interreligious educators should consider

¹ Khin Maung Din is a prominent lay theologian who worked as a professor at Yangon University in the history department. He was also a lecturer at Burma Divinity School, now Myanmar Institute of Theology. He was one of the first lay liberal theologians who tried to transform the theology of Burma Christian churches during the 1980s.

² Khin Maung Din, “Can Buddhists Be Buddhist-Christians?” in *Collections of Professor U Khin Maung Din’s Papers & Articles* (Yangon: Myanmar Council of Churches, 2002), 181.

when they form and utilize specific pedagogies, including challenges in our social context and decolonizing methodologies that other educators and researchers have already made. This chapter identifies challenges for Myanmar interreligious education and decolonization and discusses theories that some religious educators such as Judith A. Berling, bell hooks, have used in their classes.

Challenges for Interreligious Education in Myanmar

There are several facts to consider when formulating pedagogies and practices for interreligious education in Myanmar, which are also challenges for effective education generally. The first challenge is to recognize and accept religious pluralism. Diana Eck said that the greatest issue facing a multi-cultural city is establishing a pluralistic view of, and appreciation for, varying identities— ethnic, racial, and religious.³ Because Myanmar is a religiously diverse country, its people are familiar with religious diversity. Hence, the diversity of communities and traditions in itself not an obstacle to overcome, but religious pluralism, which means “an opportunity for our energetic engagement and dialogue with one another”⁴ has still been a challenge for many religious groups. Religious pluralism is a mutual engagement among religious diversity but there are religious prejudices in every religion which makes it difficult for them to mutually accept the differences between various religious traditions. Many religious people are concerned that opening themselves to mutual relationship with people of other religions would mean giving up of their commitments to their own religious traditions.

³ Diana L. Eck, “Is Our God Listening? Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism,” in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, ed. Roger Boase (London: Routledge, 2016), 22.

⁴ Eck, “Is Our God Listening?,” 22.

Ethnic diversity is another factor to consider for effective pedagogies and practices. Ethnicity in Myanmar is extremely complex. There are officially 136 ethnic groups, each with their own distinct languages and cultures. Under the 1947 Panglong Agreement, these ethnic groups were promised protection of their rights, equality, and administrative autonomy. However, before the country was given independence, the leaders of the Panglong Agreement were assassinated and those agreements for ethnic groups were never fulfilled. Instead, Myanmar leaders sought to incite national solidarity by “a policy of Burmanization, whereby Bamar language and culture and Buddhist religion have been promoted to the exclusion of other ethnic identities.”⁵ In rejection of Burmanization, many ethnic people have formed armed groups, and currently there are more than 100 armed groups in the country. Myanmar is also known for the longest running civil war between the Burmese military, *Tat-Ma-Daw* and ethnic armed groups.

The tension between ethnic groups and central government, especially the *Tat-Ma-Daw*, in the country has been a great challenge for interreligious education among the people. Despite some ethnic leaders representing their parties and ethnicities in current parliaments, most minority ethnic groups such as Kachin, Karen, Lisu, Lahu, and Chin, who belong to Christianity, still have a negative perspective of Burma and Buddhism since Buddhism has always been the religion present in Myanmar’s government.

Conflicts among different ethnic groups and severe tensions between religions makes the peaceful aspect of the interfaith movement difficult to apply in Myanmar. For instance, Myanmar Christians see Burmese Buddhists as oppressors throughout the existence of the military government. There is a long history of coercion and oppression, perpetrated and perpetuated by Burmese Buddhists, especially against ethnic minorities in the country. On the

⁵ Theo Dolan and Stephen Gray, *Media and Conflict in Myanmar: Opportunities for Media to Advance Peace* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014), 11.

other hand, Myanmar Buddhists see Christianity and other religions as foreign and Colonial religions which threaten to demolish Burmese traditions. Myanmar Buddhists see Burmese who converted to Christianity as “*Kalas*” (foreigners), suggesting that they no longer belong to the country and the people.⁶ Moreover, the conversion of Buddhists to Christianity is regarded as a betrayal and insult to Buddhism and the country.⁷

In 2012, a conflict broke out between Buddhists and Muslims after three Muslims men raped and killed a young Rakhaine Buddhist girl. Since then, conflict between Buddhists and Muslims has turned into a severe religious conflict across the country. A group of Burmese anti-Muslim nationalists drafted a group of interfaith marriage laws known as the Law on Protection of Race and Religion in response to the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in the country. The proposed laws include a ban on polygamy, legislation to control population, and a conversion law. A Buddhist woman seeking to marry a man from another religion must first ask permission from her parents and a local government official. Any man who marries a Buddhist woman is required to convert to Buddhism. Though the human rights activists tried to stop the law because it hinders people’s religious freedom, president U Thein Sein signed the law. There are many other similar tensions and challenges between religious minorities and Burmese Buddhists in the country.

To address these challenges, traditional teaching methodologies have to be revisited. Myanmar’s education system had been strongly influenced by the traditional Buddhist monastery teaching method known in Burmese “as *kyet-thu-yueh sa-an*,” which means “parrot

⁶ Pum Za Mang, “The Karen and the Politics of Conversion,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 96, no. 3 (2016): 327.

⁷ Mang, “Karen and the Politics of Conversion,” 327.

learning method.”⁸ Both Buddhism and other religions are largely overshadowed by Buddhist monastery educational ideals and methods. Asking students to memorize scripture texts without critically analyzing them is a common in both Buddhism and Christianity in Myanmar. Consequently, there has always been a lack of local academic research, especially in the field interreligious education. In the next sections, I will explore teaching methodologies for interreligious education that are relevant to the complex context of Myanmar culture.

Decolonizing Methodologies

Colonialism is a kind of dictatorship. Christine Hong says that “colonialism possesses an insatiable hunger for ownership and control. Control over bodies and land. The theft of freedom. Mastery over places and beings.”⁹ In the history of Christianity, colonialism aided Christian missionaries in violently spreading throughout the world. It is clear that Christianity still rules many theological institutions in the world. Hong therefore says that our theological and religious institutions are still are thriving on coloniality. We have not yet achieved postcoloniality. Therefore, for the theological and religious educator, “decolonization must be one of theological education’s goals.”¹⁰ According to Hong, “deconstruction and reconstruction” are the two educational strategies to apply, doing so “simultaneously and continuously as part of a commitment to decolonial work in all the spaces of learning.”¹¹

When it comes to academic teaching methodologies, Myanmar Christian religious educators have to depend on the Western research. There are limited academic researchers on

⁸ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Christianity through Our Neighbors’ Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2014), 112.

⁹ Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 15.

¹⁰ Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 2.

¹¹ Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 7.

interreligious education and methodologies for the context and culture of Myanmar. Most resources that I use in this dissertation are written by Western academic researchers and authors. And above all, academic theological education and literature have always been dominated by white Christian supremacy. In religious education, Christianity has unfortunately always been regarded as the primary knowledge and text for which to use as a lens when looking at other religions and cultures. On the other hand, so called Burmanization of the majority Buddhist religious group, is a challenge for Myanmar Christians and other minority religious groups. In public schools, Buddhism and Buddhist ritual are in the curriculum that every student must learn and practice whereas other religions and their teaching are left out. Therefore, ethnic and religious minority people in Myanmar have to struggle with both the Western religious colonial concept and Burmese colonization over the minority people.

Linda T. Smith says that exclusion and denial are two tools colonialism uses. When indigenous people were colonized and had their land taken forcefully from them, the “indigenous way of knowing were excluded and marginalized.”¹² Smith said:

This happened to indigenous views about land, for example, through the forced imposition of individualized title, though taking land away for ‘acts of rebellion,’ and through redefining land as ‘waste land’ or ‘empty land’ and then taking it away.¹³

They were fooled by the false knowledge about their own land by the colonizers a common tactic used by oppressors. Similar patterns of deceitful conduct can be seen in many other indigenous groups that were colonized by Western Christians. Among them is the Lisu ethnic group in Myanmar. Originally, Lisu people were spirit worshippers. They were first Christianized by

¹² Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), 71.

¹³ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 71.

Western missionaries in China in 1910. Today there are many Lisu spiritual traditions that Lisu Christian converts refuse to practice. For example, the Lisu people had practiced an ancestor worshipping festival which today's Lisu Christians completely reject as a non-believer's ritual. They refuse to acknowledge the deeper spirituality in this ritual. Remembering and recalling the legacy of their forefathers contributed to community growth and cohesion. Decolonizing by reclaiming meaningful rituals from our ancestors in the school system is important for growing a peaceful society. As Hong argues that "decolonization is political and individual," it is a living practice.¹⁴ It has to become our "tradition" and "activism that fights against the determination of colonial threads in our everyday lives."¹⁵

Judith Berling

Judith A. Berling is a professor emerita of Chinese and comparative religions at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. She is a prominent interreligious educator who contributed teaching pedagogies and theories for interreligious education based on her teaching experiences. She confesses that she is also a teacher who shifted her teaching strategy from a "top-down" method to a "collaborative learning" method. For many years, she was "a slave to 'coverage' and to 'introducing the subject.'"¹⁶ In later years, she started to adopt a collaborative learning model. Instead of focusing on her own performance and what she can teach students, she now focuses on what students (and she herself) can learn and achieve together, seeing everyone as a valuable part of the learning process. Her work of teaching pedagogies in *Understanding Other Religious World* is an important tool for interreligious educators.

¹⁴ Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 16.

¹⁵ Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 16.

¹⁶ Judith A. Berling, "Getting Out of the Way: A Strategy for Engaging Students in Collaborative Learning," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 1, no. 1 (1998): 31.

Judith Berling proposes five threads for interreligious learning: (1) encountering difference or entering other worlds; (2) responding from one's own location; (3) conducting conversation and dialogue; (4) developing relationship; and (5) internalizing the process. These five threads include and emphasize the value of mutual respect and conversation. Interreligious learning involves entering into the world of other religions. Berling describes that in learning about other religions, recognizing and acknowledging "difference as difference, not reducing another person, culture, or religion to a variation of what the interpreter knows based on his own form of life" is vital.¹⁷ Understanding another religion is an expected outcome from encountering difference and entering other worlds because the task of learning another religion is to understand, rather than simply accumulating facts and information. Berling states that "human understanding is always shaped by the interpreter's location and experience, which may be quite different from the location and experiences she seeks to understand."¹⁸ Entering into a different world and confronting difference and otherness can be challenging, but it is essential for understanding other religions.

Myanmar Christians experience Buddhism in their daily lives. There are many Buddhism-related things throughout the country such as pagodas and monasteries, as well as Buddhist monks and nuns everywhere. There are also many daily Buddhist activities such as food offerings to monks and nuns, Buddhist monk preaching ceremonies, and Buddhist festivals throughout the year. However, this general experience of another religion cannot become genuine encounter and lead to deep understanding until Myanmar Christians are willing to really enter into their world. For Berling, a genuine interreligious encounter always has discomfort in

¹⁷ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 66.

¹⁸ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 65.

it. In this thread, Berling suggests acknowledging difference as difference without reducing other cultures and religions based on our own understanding. Fearing the loss of their Christian identity, and the exclusive Christian doctrines, Christians are reluctant to mingle with Buddhists genuinely. We need to listen and understand the voices of others. Encountering different religious texts is one way to hear these voices. Authors of these religious texts represent “an actual voice of the tradition” and they articulate “the tradition’s language, symbols, issues, and practices.”¹⁹ Berling warns that entering a different world is “always partial since the learner cannot literally put himself in the place of the other.”²⁰ However, it is important for interreligious learning and “to understand another religion as accurately as possible and as far as possible.”²¹

Every interreligious learner begins their learning process from the perspective of their own religious identity. For instance, Christian identity is the foundation from which Christians to learn about other religions and Buddhist identity is the foundation for Buddhists. The language, practices, symbols, and rituals that interreligious learners use will be derived and interpreted through the lens of their original religious background. The important message of this second thread, *responding from one’s own location*, is how they understand the relationship of our own religious identity to other religions. Even though beginners may fear that learning another religion will undermine their own religious identity, as they open themselves to other religious traditions and face their fears and challenges, they will grow and eventually the fear will dissipate. The challenges of this thread can be reconciled in the third thread, *conducting*

¹⁹ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 69.

²⁰ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 71.

²¹ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 71.

conversation and dialogue. Without dialogue and conversation, the fear of losing our religious identities is very difficult to overcome.

In this thread, both participants in the conversation must be open and willing to learn from each other. Both parties must be “mutually respectful and attentive to the voice of the other” even in times when differences are great.²² According to Abby S. Hocky, “dialogue is a process of honest speaking and honest listening: an exchange that create trust and understanding.”²³ Therefore, mutual understanding is expected from each partner through mutual respect and listening to each other attentively. Fostering this mutual understanding and respect makes a serious engagement with each other’s religions possible.

Building relationships is important for interreligious learning. Berling points out that “learning other religions seek more than ideas; they are also seeking to understand and develop appropriate relationship with adherents of other religions, both individually and collectively.”²⁴ This learning process provides the basis for building good relationships which can lead to progressive transformation within the community. Religious leaders should be prepared to encounter and develop new relationship through helping interfaith families in their faith community, organizing field education, well-designed religious site visits, and community learning opportunities.²⁵

²² Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 74.

²³ Abby S. Hocky, “Dialogue through Arts: Opening the World’s Door,” in *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook*, ed. Bud Heckman, with Rori Picker Neiss (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2008), 45.

²⁴ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 77.

²⁵ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 79.

Internalizing the process is a thread that forms “ongoing learning, wisdom, and practice.”²⁶ Berling says, “it is not just a process of absorbing information but an empowerment of learners to engage broader and broader spheres of knowledge and experience.”²⁷ Ofelia O. Villero also describes that internalizing the process involves not just simply absorbing facts and information, but transformation, “perhaps from an old self to a new person, from a depressed community to a thriving one.”²⁸ Learning is not a static activity, but is always an ongoing process of both self and social transformation; there is always more to learn and therefore it is important to always be prepared for the next learning experience.

Judith Berling’s classroom teaching method is different from traditional lectures. First, she creates a space in the classroom for everyone, including herself, to sit at the same level in a circle. This space is a safe space that enables everyone to share their thoughts and have the potential for transformation. Second, her classes are open to all students, from different academic backgrounds, and who have different expertise, perspectives, and interests. Third, Berling opens herself as an active learner when students bring up issues and topics that she is not familiar with. Fourth, she never excuses herself from classroom but always participates in the learning process. Finally, she uses and encourages active listening throughout class. Berling calls this approach to learning in the classroom “getting out of the way,” where every participant is allowed to become part of the learning community.²⁹ Every participant in the learning circle takes part in active

²⁶ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 80.

²⁷ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 80.

²⁸ Ofelia O. Villero, “Crossing Disciplines: Beyond Religious Studies and the Health Sciences,” in *Interreligious Pedagogy: Reflections and Applications in Honor of Judith A. Berling*, ed. Jung Eun Sophia Park and Emily S. Wu (Cham, Switz.: Springer International, 2018), 39.

²⁹ Judith A. Berling, “Getting Out of the Way,” 31.

learning and teaching. There are several learning pedagogies that get away from the traditional learning process, four of which will be discussed in the next section.

Pedagogies for Interreligious Education

Boundary-Crossing Pedagogy

Interreligious education involves mutual teaching and learning from one another's religion and religious traditions. Interreligious education is often equated to interfaith dialogue, but is actually more than this. It is a process of learning other religions by crossing the boundaries of one's own religious understanding; dialogue is a crucial part of this, but so is religious experiences. The five threads of Berling's process for teaching and learning other religions discussed previously empower religious learners to imagine the possibilities for crossing boundaries. And although crossing these boundaries and coming to a deep understanding of other religions may be uncomfortable, it is necessary a foundation of peace among people from different religions. According to Jung Eun Sophia Park and Emily S. Wu, interreligious education "is most celebrated for its focus on and effectiveness in boundary crossing."³⁰

Judith identifies six principles of the boundary-crossing learning process: (1) building on the diversity of learner's experiences; (2) empowering learners through developing their voice and agency; (3) imaginatively entering other worlds through arts, text, or narrative; (4) engaging, understanding, and interpreting the distinctive ways in which religions represent themselves; (5) developing mediating or translating linguistic flexibility through mutually critical conversations; and (6) establishing mutually respectful relationships, learning to stand with others.³¹

³⁰ Jung Eun Sophia Park and Emily S. Wu, "Introduction," in Park and Wu, *Interreligious Pedagogy*, 5.

³¹ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 33.

According to Park and Wu, boundary-crossing pedagogy aims for “*spiritual transformation*.”³² Mutual transformation in interreligious education takes place beyond dialogue. In interreligious dialogue, one does not enter with the intention to change the other person. However, the transformation can take place as a result of the encounter. Joco Cilliers assures that “it is only when there is a deep understanding of one’s own religious beliefs and commitments that progress can be made in achieving true understanding and respect for the religious values and beliefs of others.”³³

It is also essential to pay attention to the concept of “friendship and hospitality” in the pedagogies of boundary-crossing. Marjorie Suchocki proposes a model of friendship among different religions as a mission.³⁴ She sees God’s mission as friendship. The goal is not to convert another to our religion but to “convert” another to a bond of friendship where they can freely talk with each other, argue with each other, and even critique each other. Religions must establish friendly relationships, working cooperatively with people toward deeper forms of common good. Different religious people share who they are with one another so that they can enter into the model of mission as cooperative friendship, believing that sharing differences do not diminish the friendship, but enrich it. This friendship does not require that each become the other, but each offer oneself to the other and are willing to receive and accept each other and work together toward the common good. To disagree with the other person is not to disparage them, but to engage at the depth levels of who they each are.

³² Park and Wu, “Introduction,” 4.

³³ Jojo Cilliers, “Building Bridges for Interfaith Dialogue,” in Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, 48, 49.

³⁴ Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 109.

Marion Larson and Sara Shady stress that interfaith engagement between persons requires “forging a path where we can express our own beliefs and perspectives while at the same time respectfully listening to and seeking to understand the beliefs of others.”³⁵ Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook talks about crossing the border in a Christian term as a Pentecost paradigm which means to give up “exclusivist claims.”³⁶ According to Kujawa-Holbrook, “For Christians, the Pentecost story reveals the power of interreligious encounter, whereby the Spirit is unleashed, and faith and relationships are transformed.”³⁷ It is only through crossing the borders and encountering differences, new insights can be discovered which can deepen our faith. As we cross boundaries, we grow deep in understanding others. That is how we can form healthy communities that go out and connect to the wider society.

Engaged Dialogical Pedagogy

Engaged dialogical pedagogy is based on the process of interactive and mutual learning/sharing of different experiences and understandings about the divine, humanity, and the world. Therefore, it is a continuing quest for truth or a search for a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse aspects of life. bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy, which she also calls “progressive, holistic education,”³⁸ is important for interreligious learning because there is a need for freedom and engaged learning for education in Myanmar churches. Myanmar church members are taught to be obedient to their pastors and church leaders. They are expected to, and often do, simply accept whatever is taught and preached by their pastors without any self- critical

³⁵ Marion H. Larson and Sara L. H. Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge: Educating Christians for a Multifaith World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 75.

³⁶ Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders*, 33.

³⁷ Kujawa-Holbrook, *God Beyond Borders*, 33.

³⁸ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 15.

analysis or discussion. Questioning the teachings and ideas of their leaders is regarded as the act of rebellion and severely frowned upon.

This system comes from the political system of the country which directly affects the education system. Students in Myanmar are not familiar with freedom in education. Sharing and discussion in the classroom is uncommon in both schools and churches. Linda T. Smith clearly states that, “objectification is a process of dehumanization.”³⁹ The system that objectifies and dehumanizes the people of Myanmar and their thoughts under the military regime has affected students of every religion in the country including Christians and religious education. The teacher or the leader is the person to talk and teach. According to bell hooks, “education is the practice of freedom.”⁴⁰ Freedom in learning is vital because according to Frank A. Thomas, “freedom is an inner spiritual reality and identity given by Christ from which social, economic, and political rights, responsibilities, and freedoms flow.”⁴¹ Freedom should be applied in church education where Christ is the center, reclaiming Christ who values freedom and liberation.

Engaged pedagogy is important because it helps the teacher and students grow together. bell hooks clearly states that engaged pedagogy does not simply seek to empower students, but any classroom that applies this pedagogy is also a place where teachers grow and are empowered.⁴² It is important for both the teacher and learner to learn and grow together. In engaged pedagogy, the leader is first engaged with his or her whole self as a “union of mind,

³⁹ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 40.

⁴⁰ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.

⁴¹ Frank A. Thomas, *Spiritual Maturity: Preserving Congregational Health and Balance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 10.

⁴² hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.

body, and spirit.”⁴³ Hooks also talks about engaging oneself first to prepare to teach through “self-actualization.”⁴⁴ In most of our Myanmar’s education system, there has been lack of teacher’s engaging themselves and a lack of self-actualization. bell hooks points out that “professors who are not concerned with inner well-being are the most threatened by the demand on the part of students for liberatory education, for pedagogical processes that will aid them in their own struggle for self-actualization.”⁴⁵ Therefore, educators should prepare first to engage themselves through “self-actualization.”

Dialogical learning is what makes engaged pedagogy crucial for education. Because the people of Myanmar were under the oppression of the military government for many decades and forced to keep quiet while a handful leaders ruled over the whole country, they only recently became familiar with the concept of dialogue. The militarized political system affected the whole country’s social and education system. Politically, all people were to keep quiet under the command of the government. Socially, at home and in community, children and women were to submit to the leadership of fathers and male leaders, whether they were good or bad. Religiously, church members, especially, women were to keep silent under the hierarchical and patriarchal systems. In the school, every student was expected to say yes to what teachers said and were not allowed to speak out. Dialogical education is a continuing quest for truth and a search for a more comprehensive understanding of diverse aspects of life. Introducing a dialogical way of learning such as group discussions, giving questions, and assigning students to engage in active participation is crucial for interreligious education.

⁴³ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 18.

⁴⁴ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 19.

⁴⁵ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 17.

The goal of interreligious learning is not only to find common ground among different religions, but also to embrace differences. Therefore, active listening is an important method in creating a dialogical learning environment so that we can openly learn about these differences. According to Judith A. Berling, “the creation of this [this kind of] learning community requires bringing students into active conversation, empowering them to speak, but also teaching them to listen to one another.”⁴⁶ Judith further says hooks’ method of learning “seeks to include all of the voices and perspectives in the classroom” and “seeks to bring the multiple voices to contribute to the shared issues at hand, and to enhance the learning experience of the group.”⁴⁷ Samuel Ngun Ling states that, “a genuine dialogue is by nature educational. It is a process of listening to and learning from others that is a self-critical reflection on the experiences and convictions of one’s existential reality in relation to that of others in a different context.”⁴⁸ Likewise, Lieberts also affirms that “Spiritual direction involves hearing. It develops an active listening which encourages, receives, honors and ultimately sets free the language of the soul, the hunger of the heart, the desires of the spirit, the integrity of the whole person.”⁴⁹ According to Liebert, “Spiritual direction elicits from both the spiritual director and the seeker particular modes of seeing, hearing, naming, responding, celebrating and acting.”⁵⁰ “Successful interfaith engagement between persons with deep faith commitments requires forging a path where we can express our own beliefs and perspectives while at the same time respectfully listening to and

⁴⁶ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 25.

⁴⁷ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 25.

⁴⁸ Samuel Ngun Ling, “Theological Education and Dialogue,” *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin* 6 (June 2006): 3.

⁴⁹ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns*, 7.

⁵⁰ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns*, 8.

seeking to understand the beliefs of others.”⁵¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, in *The Art of Communicating*, says, “We communicate to be understood and to understand others.”⁵² He says that “deep listening” and “loving speech” are the two keys to effective and true communication.⁵³ It is important that listening be compassionate. In compassionate listening, “the focus is on validating another’s experience as part of the encounter, whether or not that experience resonates with one’s own.”⁵⁴ The core purpose of compassionate listening is to show our sympathy and care by being sincerely present with the other person and not judging whether or not we agree with them.⁵⁵ The experience of being sincerely heard by another is provides a foundation for building trust and opens the door for mutual relationship. Ling states that, “a genuine dialogue is by nature educational. It is a process of listening to and learning from others that is a self-critical reflection on the experiences and convictions of one’s existential reality in relation to that of others in a different context.”⁵⁶ Theological education needs genuine and authentic dialogue. The whole theological enterprise that has taken place between theological teachers and students must be dialectical. While students must be free to critically explore and think, teachers must also be prepared to respond creatively to what their students need. Ling persists, “a teacher’s education should neither be a type of transmission nor be a type of induction but a two-way process of teacher-student learning, dialogical and relational.”⁵⁷ Therefore, dialogical with engaged

⁵¹ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 75.

⁵² Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communicating* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), chapter 3, iBooks.

⁵³ Hanh, *The Art of Communicating*, chapter 3.

⁵⁴ Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders*, 34.

⁵⁵ Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders*, 34.

⁵⁶ Ling, “Theological Education and Dialogue,” 3.

⁵⁷ Ling, “Theological Education and Dialogue,” 3.

learning would be a method for the course interreligious dialogue. Everyone should be given freedom to speak and share their opinions for purpose of group learning.

bell hook's engaged pedagogy is an important method for interreligious learning. As Berling points out, "in hook's model, the authority of the teacher is used to empower students," through dialogical teaching methods, not to dominate them. Interreligious education is based on a dialogical method, which requires knowledge and involvement of one's own religious tradition and also of other traditions. The dialogical model admits the importance of mutual teaching and learning. According to Park, in the dialogical model, partners take both the positions of subject and object simultaneously while possessing their own "critical self-knowledge of religion and of culture."⁵⁸ They are committed to deepening their knowledge about religion from the other partners through deeply engaging with others. This model regards one's own religions as an instrument to interpret and understanding the other.

Courtney Bruntz, in her chapter "Interreligious Education for the Millennial Generation," proposes the flipped classroom learning method for her class based on an engaged learning pedagogy.⁵⁹ Flipped classroom learning is "a type of blended student-centered pedagogical model where instructors make most of the face-to-face time with students by engaging in active learning tasks to help them process and apply instructional material."⁶⁰ In a flipped classroom, students are given new learning materials before the class, and in the class they deepen their learning of the materials through discussion. This discussion-based learning is different from

⁵⁸ Jung Eun Sophia Park, "Teaching and Learning Religion with Nones: An Application of Judith Berling's Pedagogy," in Park and Wu, *Interreligious Pedagogy*, 19.

⁵⁹ Courtney Bruntz, "Interreligious Education for the Millennial Generation," in Park and Wu, *Interreligious Pedagogy*, 63.

⁶⁰ Bruntz, "Education for the Millennial Generation," 63.

traditional methods in which students are introduced to new materials through lecture during class. According to Bruntz, flipped classrooms produce “improved educational outcomes including teaching students to problem solve, become interactive learners, and master new material on their own.”⁶¹ In this teaching style, students themselves get to engage with the educational materials.

Mutual Learning Pedagogy

In the mutual learning pedagogy, teachers are removed from the center of class and instead become co-learners together with their students. Park sets six steps to follow for interreligious education using the mutual learning pedagogy. The first step is creating a safe space “by establishing a sense of community.”⁶² No student should feel excluded by the feeling of insecurity. Park advised that “the whole class would collect the prior knowledge through which students would bring their own experience” that would give students “confidence.”⁶³

The second step is to draw a conceptual map in which the teacher provides specific categories such as worship, basic teaching, meditation, ritual, and social engagement. Religion in and of itself is a multi-faceted practice that involves the stories believers hold concerning how the religion came about, the myths that surround the entire religion and their supernatural being, the practices they undertake in commemoration, and the symbols that are relevant to them. Thus, to fully comprehend a religion, it is important that one becomes conversant with all these facets of another religion and another person’s religious experience. Practices are perhaps the most important aspect of any religion because they provide the rules and ethics that people use to

⁶¹ Bruntz, “Education for the Millennial Generation,” 64.

⁶² Park, “Teaching and Learning Religion,” 21.

⁶³ Park, “Teaching and Learning Religion,” 21.

guide their thoughts and actions. Practices include sacred things like prayers, fasting, meditation, incantations, sacrifices, festivals, and offerings. To be a full member of any religion, one must not only understand the various aspects that the religion is composed of, but also practice them.

The third step is to visit religious sites to provide hands-on religious experiences to the students. What makes people stay completely loyal to religion is that it gives them not only a sense of belonging, but also a sense of hope in life. This is boosted by the fact that most religions have sacred narratives that are kept in scriptures, together with symbols and holy places. These help give human beings a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, a source of direction for all the activities they undertake. The sacred spaces of other religions are important for students of interreligious education to experience. For students in Myanmar, the class can be designed to visit other religious centers, such as the Buddhist University and Islamic Center, to learn and engage in dialogue with people of different faiths. Ling says, “genuine theology is community and context oriented.”⁶⁴ Therefore, it is important that all participants experience the real community of other religious faiths and their contexts in order to construct a genuine interreligious theology. From these visits, students will learn about other religions and how to be engaged with them.

The fourth step is to extensively analyze teaching materials and adapt them as needed to make them relevant to the specific classroom context they’re being taught in. In this step the teaching materials can be rearranged according to the students’ needs and interests. The fifth step is to introduce some theories to students such as post-colonialism and feminist theory based on their questions and inquiries out of their learning. The final step is where students share new knowledge and celebrates the intellectual and spiritual growth together as a learning community

⁶⁴ Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar*, 5.

through mutual engagement. In order to encourage engaged learning, the class should also be designed to have time where students are divided into different groups to present on different topics related to the course's weekly readings. In these group presentations, every student, including those who are quiet in the class, will have a chance to talk and share their thoughts, and in preparing these presentations, students will have time to share their thoughts and experiences within their groups. Through these experiences, students will develop teamwork skills as every student will be required to participate by sharing, listening, and responding to others.

Student-Centered Learning

According to Emily Richmond, student-centered learning involves allowing students to choose how and what they learn and encourages them to connect the instructional material with their own interests and real-world experiences.⁶⁵ Student-centered learning is challenging for teachers and instructors in most parts of Asian countries, including Myanmar, where the teacher-centered learning system, a “top-down” system, is widely adopted. Student-centered learning requires humbleness from teachers. Hong's idea of humble modesty for intercultural and interreligious intelligence⁶⁶ is essential for the student-centered learning. In teaching and learning well, “the posture of humble modesty as embodied through intercultural and interreligious intelligence is critical.”⁶⁷ For Hong, humility and modesty work hand in hand “to describe an inward perspective that naturally creates an outward response.”⁶⁸ Unless educators are willing to

⁶⁵ Emily Richmond, “Student-Centered Learning,” SCOPE: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, Stanford Graduate School of Education, April 2, 2014, <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/news/articles/1193#:~:text=In%20a%20student%2Dcentered%20learning,world%20experiences%20on%20the%20other>.

⁶⁶ Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 24.

⁶⁷ Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 24.

⁶⁸ Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 23.

embody the posture of humble modesty, they will not be able to adapt student-centered learning because in this learning, teachers are also regarded as learners.

In Berling's teaching, she emphasizes decentering herself and empowering students to be co-teachers and co-learners.⁶⁹ An important aspect of student-centered learning is empowering students encouraging them to bring their interest, knowledge, and experiences to class and instructing them not to rely solely on their teachers. Berling calls this "getting out of the way," a practice where she actively aims to remove herself from the center of the learning process and allow everyone in the room to become part of the learning community.⁷⁰ Bruntz admits that in student-centered learning, "the instructor must give up all control of the learning experience by simply providing mechanisms for students to take ownership over what is learned."⁷¹ The model of student-centered learning focuses "on how to foster a joy of learning from students by creating an atmosphere in which all persons in the class (including the instructor) are 'in the trenches' together."⁷²

It is also very important, as Emily Richmond warned, that instructors be well trained to use the method of student-centered learning. This method can cause chaos in the classroom when teachers are not prepared, given it is an "open-plan classroom environment."⁷³ Compared to the teacher-centered model, instructors in the student-centered learning must focus on mentoring and

⁶⁹ Berling, "Getting Out of the Way," 31.

⁷⁰ Emily S. Wu, "Crossing Boundaries with Narratives: Making Space with Oral History in Community Service-Learning," in Park and Wu, *Interreligious Pedagogy*, 49.

⁷¹ Bruntz, "Education for the Millennial Generation," 70.

⁷² Bruntz, "Education for the Millennial Generation," 71.

⁷³ Richmond, "Student-Centered Learning."

coaching rather than lecturing. Therefore, they must have significant training in these areas in order to have the skills needed to guide students during the learning process.

Strategies and Practices for Interreligious Education

The most important thing for interreligious education is to cultivate a healthy community for dialogue. Meaningful dialogue in interreligious education goes beyond simple conversation between people. We must learn to become familiar and comfortable asking questions and openly listening to critiques, even though it can be uncomfortable at times. Perhaps even more importantly, we must be willing to dialogue instead of debate, knowing that everyone comes from a different background and has different understandings of religion. Focusing on the spirit of learning together as a community is crucial in cultivating a healthy community for dialogue.

Establishing community rules is helpful starting point for community conversation. Depending on the cultural context, we can set our own rules within the group. Larson and Shady suggest some sample rules:

- Speak honestly and openly
- What is said in the room stays in the room
- Avoid name-calling and stereotypes
- Look for what's right and true, even in the views with which you disagree
- Always show respect.⁷⁴

Building trust is the most essential part in creating healthy community dialogue. It can be difficult to build trust when there is a history of religious conflicts in the community, but establishing common ground is a great way to start this process. The common ground does not

⁷⁴ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 133.

necessarily have to be related to religion at all. Gathering around “causes that focus on religious similarities and encourage multi-faith humanitarian action” may be an effective way to promote trust among the group.”⁷⁵ By establishing common ground before further learning simultaneously creates a safe space which is needed to build trust among the community.

Model of Inclusion

Larson and Shady discuss two models in responding to religious diversity: religious tolerance and religious affirmation. Religious tolerance is an approach “to establish civic harmony and keep religious differences from leading to violence” but it does not require us to learn from others and engage in other religious tradition.⁷⁶ Therefore, religious tolerance cannot fulfill the goal of interreligious education. On the other hand, affirmation goes beyond tolerance. In affirming another religion, “we refrain from asserting our own views so we don’t offend the other person or undermine her views.”⁷⁷ Even though affirmation helps to promote relationship with the other religions, it does not foster deeper understanding of religious traditions. We want interreligious engagement in which all religious traditions are valued and mutually respected by learning from each other. Religious affirmation can reduce one’s own religious values and beliefs as we do not want to offend the other person’s religions and beliefs. Therefore, religious affirmation cannot promise us to deeply engage in different religions. For these reasons, Larson

⁷⁵ Emily Bertsche et al., *Bridging Babel: New Social Media and Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2010), 20, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/bridging-babel-new-social-media-and-interreligious-and-intercultural-understanding>.

⁷⁶ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 74.

⁷⁷ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 74.

and Shady suggest “inclusion” as a middle path between “tolerance and affirmation” for interfaith engagement.⁷⁸

The inclusive model cultivates mutual understanding and encourages not only respect of differences, but also a willingness to engage in open dialogue about those differences for the sake of civic solidarity.⁷⁹ It accepts the strengths of tolerance and of affirmation, but beyond tolerance to learn and encounter other religious without going as far as full affirmation to the point where we denounce our own religious beliefs. This model takes differences seriously, affirming that human beings are capable of pushing themselves beyond tolerance to love their neighbors. It “promotes a shared reality where all partners in the dialogue come to understand each other’s position, even if they don’t agree with it, and build a meaningful relationship despite their differences.”⁸⁰ In her article “Beyond Common Ground: Towards Critical Engagement in Interfaith Organizing,” Kristina J. Meyer presents her study of participants in a national network called Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ). IWJ is an organization that works for the rights of grassroots worker by engaging different religious communities. One significant narrative that is used in IWJ is “inclusive identity,” in which participants in IWJ are willing to create a community that invites all people regardless of their race, gender, religious and social backgrounds, and political preference.⁸¹ The organization strives to be a place where everyone who cares about worker justice is welcome.

⁷⁸ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 75.

⁷⁹ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 85.

⁸⁰ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 75.

⁸¹ Kristina J. Meyer, “Beyond Common Ground: Towards Critical Engagement in Interfaith Organizing,” *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 28 (December 2019): 68-69.

The path of inclusion can be challenging because in this model, we must listen openly and try to understand the other person who believes differently while also sharing our own beliefs and perspectives. Yet as Larson and Shady affirm, this model the path to achieve peace among different religions as well as to love our neighbors.

Model of Friendship

Marjorie Suchocki promotes “friendship” as a mission for a religiously pluralistic world. Developing friendship among different religions also promotes interreligious education. She says, “Religions must become friends with one another, working cooperatively with people of other religions toward deeper forms of common good.”⁸² The model of friendship for interreligious education has a spiritual value. In *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots*, Marcia Prager and Rebecca Kratz Mays, a Jew and Quaker respectively, expand on their own friendship and the value and richness this brought to their interreligious learning process. Their friendship was “a spirit-filled time, a journey of discovery,” where they found their mutual commitment to the Divine, and to making peace and justice a reality, strengthened.⁸³

Many Christians believe that the Christian mission is to convert other people to Christianity – that is the mission Jesus Christ gave his followers. For them, friendship is used as a strategy to evangelize people of other religions. In opposition to this belief, Suchocki asserts that God is calling us “to convert the world toward friendship,” not to convert the world to our religion.⁸⁴ The purpose of interreligious education is not to convert the other person to our religion; “to do so would undermine the principles of interreligious dialogue, and everyone who

⁸² Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 109.

⁸³ Marcia Prager and Rebecca Kratz Mays, “Friendship Counts Most,” in Mays, *Dialogue at the Grass Roots*, 127.

⁸⁴ Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 109.

participates in dialogue must understand this because it requires an open, honest environment.”⁸⁵

In the friendship model, people of different religions come together as friends, sharing stories, listening to one another, and finding ways to work together for the common good and social justice in the community. Suchocki asks, “how can we love one another if we do not know one another?”⁸⁶ Only through coming as friends can we solve common problems of the community.

There are several things we can learn from the model of friendship to apply in interreligious education. There are numerous differences among friends. However, those differences do not diminish genuine friendship, but instead, they enrich it. It is the same with religion. Even though there are many differences among the religious traditions of the world, when they maintain a spirit of true friendship, those differences can complement one another and enhance the friendship. As Suchocki maintains, “Mutual understanding can enhance each form of religion in ways we are barely beginning to appreciate.”⁸⁷ Friendship builds upon differences to bring solidarity in the community by promoting common interests and common good.

In the midst of differences, friends have something to learn from each other and their different backgrounds and life experiences. Suchocki states that, “an attitude of friendship toward each other would encourage each to learn more about the other.”⁸⁸ They only need to be willing and honest to learn, listen, and share the depths of oneself with the other.

In friendship, friends participate in one another’s activities for simply to enjoy being together or to accomplish mutual goals.⁸⁹ In order to promote the relationship between different

⁸⁵ Bertsche et al., *Bridging Babel*, 23.

⁸⁶ Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 110.

⁸⁷ Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 111.

⁸⁸ Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 113.

⁸⁹ Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 112.

religions, it is important that the learning process includes participating in the religious activities, festivals, and rituals. Doing so provides a great opportunity to ask questions of members of a particular religion and develop an appreciation for each religion's uniqueness. Therefore, interreligious education should include field trips to different religious sites and festivals in which participants can experience friendship and hospitality. Friends rejoice in each other's achievement and suffer each other's pain. They respect the perspectives, beliefs, and personhood of the other while caring for one another.

Genuine friendship brings about mutual transformation as each person participates in conversation, activities, and sharing and listening to one another, and simply spends time being together. It is fundamental that "friends respect each other's personhood, and trust each other, knowing that each cares about the other's well-being."⁹⁰ It is through this kind of relationship that transformation becomes possible.⁹¹ Student-centered learning can promote this kind of meaningful friendship among students in interreligious education. Interreligious education should foster mutual and long-lasting friendship among different religions in order to build peace in a community.

Hospitality

Hospitality is fundamental to friendship and also vital for interreligious education. James L. Fredericks expresses that "every friend, no matter how good or how old a friend, was once a stranger. Therefore, every friendship, no matter how good or how old, once involved making a

⁹⁰ Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 112.

⁹¹ Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity*, 112.

hospitable place in our lives for a stranger.⁹² There is spiritual value in welcoming a stranger into our space. As Fredericks says, it “entails a de-centering of the self.”⁹³ There is a loss of privacy and security in welcoming strangers, but there is also hope and an opportunity to grow together in learning from one another. There is strangeness in welcoming strangers, but “strangeness to one another is the bond that holds” the friendship together.⁹⁴ Religious “strangeness” brings spiritual depth and purpose to friendship. In a spiritual friendship, there is no need to convert to the other religion. Rather, spiritual friendship with people of other religions is “a way to embrace and honor” what one cannot choose.⁹⁵ In Myanmar culture, people are naturally friendly, helpful, and hospitable. Guests are valued in every family as “*shwe eh dae*,” which means “golden guests,” with the connotation that strangers bring valuable wisdom, knowledge, and friendship to the family. Therefore, guests and strangers are warmly welcomed and treated with generous hospitality.

Hospitality implies “a responsibility to support religious others at the social and political level, and an important way to provide such support is to fight religious prejudice.”⁹⁶ Welcoming and spending time with our religious neighbors in a spirit of hospitality “equips us to show love in additional ways.”⁹⁷ Hospitality fights against religious prejudice and seeks ways to promote common good. This basic spirit of hospitality should be promoted and used in interreligious

⁹² James L. Fredericks, “Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship,” in *The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology, and Spirituality in a Multifaith World*, ed. David R. Brockman and Ruben L. F. Habito (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 219.

⁹³ Fredericks, “Masao Abe,” 219.

⁹⁴ Fredericks, “Masao Abe,” 221.

⁹⁵ Fredericks, “Masao Abe,” 222.

⁹⁶ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 46.

⁹⁷ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 10.

education. We can invite our neighbors of other religions into our home or our religious sites and treat them with the spirit of hospitality and vice versa with the intention to learn about different religious traditions and rituals.

Love Your Neighbors

Every religion has a faith-based responsibility to pursue interfaith cooperation. For instance, Christianity is based on Jesus' teaching to love God and love your neighbors. Love is the ultimate concern for all religions and essential to bring about peace in the world. Saw Hlaing Bwa said "if peace is what all we need as our ultimate goal, then love in action is the only way that we can achieve a peaceful future."⁹⁸ When Jesus says to love our neighbors, he means to love everyone regardless of their religion, beliefs, ethnic group, and culture.

Interreligious education must be based on the attitude of loving our neighbors. Larson and Shady say that "Loving our religious neighbors goes beyond our personal interaction with them."⁹⁹ Loving our neighbors is more than a feeling or attitude; it is also action and presence. Being present to other religions and accepting them the way they are is an act of love. According to Kristin J. Largen, love means giving attention to the other person, accepting the person as the way they are, and being willing to learn new things from them and grow in friendship.¹⁰⁰ In Largen's terms, loving other religious people as a Christian means to "develop relationships of

⁹⁸ Saw Hlaing Bwa, "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself," *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin* 10 (December 2008): 60.

⁹⁹ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ Kristin Johnston Largen, "A Christian Rationale for Interreligious Teaching and Learning," in *Interreligious Learning and Teaching: A Christian Rationale for Transformative Praxis*, ed. Kristin Johnston Largen, with Mary E. Hess and Christy Lohr Sapp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 59.

mutual affection, understanding, and appreciation” which cannot be done without interreligious dialogue.¹⁰¹

The Role of Social Media in Interreligious Education

Social media is a powerful tool and the primary medium to connect to a diversity of people, places, and ideas in our interconnected world. Internet access has become largely available in most parts of Myanmar, including rural areas on mobile devices. There are many instances in which social media has been used for peacebuilding and education. Anand Varghese from the Center of Innovation for Science, Technology, and Peacebuilding at the US Institute of Peace believes that social media “may replace offline engagement as the primary tool for interreligious dialogue” because “the potential for intercultural and interreligious dialogue to be integrated into school curriculums by using online video conferencing to connect students with their peers on the other side of the world.”¹⁰² Especially during the pandemic, social media has become an increasingly important part of human society, allowing us to connect, communicate, engage, and access a broad range of information, people, and perspectives instantly and accessibly. For churches, social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube have become essential means to bring the congregation together while practicing social distancing. Likewise, many other religious groups have also created their own virtual communities online. According to Berkeley Center Undergraduate Fellows report, ever since 9/11, Muslims have used social media help others understand their faith and to promote a positive image of Islam.¹⁰³ They have

¹⁰¹ Largen, “A Christian Rationale,” 59.

¹⁰² Bertsche et al., *Bridging Babel*, 20.

¹⁰³ Bertsche et al., *Bridging Babel*, 11.

found that the internet and social media have been effective way to “combat radicalization and aggressive ideologies.”¹⁰⁴

Thomas Banchoff, the director of Georgetown University Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs states,

*Interfaith understanding is about communication, and communication is increasingly about new social media. If we want to support dialogue across religious divides on the world’s most pressing policy challenges, we need a better grasp of how technology connects people and mobilizes them for action.*¹⁰⁵

Social media has been widely used as a means to engage in religious dialogue. For instance, interreligious organizations like Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), founded by Eboo Patel, have launched their own social networking and Facebook pages (IFYC’s is called Bridge-Builder) for those seeking to engage in interreligious dialogue, and they’ve found them to be very successful.¹⁰⁶

Despite all the benefits of social media for cultivating relationships, it has also been used to increase religious and ethnic tensions by spreading misinformation and hate speech. In Myanmar, hate speech “has proliferated online, including reinforcing negative stereotypes about both Muslims and Buddhists.”¹⁰⁷ The challenging question is how religious leaders can prevent the consequences of misinformation and hate speech online. One basic solution is to educate students with religious knowledge in schools, in community, and through social activism while teaching them the importance of checking the sources they read online and encouraging them to post and comments hate speech and misinformation with accurate information.

¹⁰⁴ Bertsche et al., *Bridging Babel*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Bertsche et al., *Bridging Babel*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Bertsche et al., *Bridging Babel*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Dolan and Gray, *Media and Conflict in Myanmar*, 18.

Interreligious Education in Three Settings

School

Religious knowledge should be part of basic education in the school system. In “Interreligious Education and Dialogue in Japan,” D. M. Filus writes about how schools in Japan provide religious knowledge to their students. In both public and private schools, a general history of different religions is taught to students even though some private schools tend to conduct classes on their own religions. According to Filus, “Courses on religious culture will lead to smooth international cooperation and intercultural exchange.”¹⁰⁸ Religious education in general should be included in schools because knowledge of religious cultures can contribute mutual understanding in the multicultural and multi-religious society and promote human rights in the country.

Teaching religion in Myanmar schools is essential. Misunderstandings about religion play a large role in conflict and therefore, schoolteachers and parents have the responsibility to teach children about religions in an effort to promote morality, peace and the well-being of the whole humanity. However, only Buddhism is exclusively included in textbooks and that creates religious prejudices toward non-Buddhist students. Buddhism and Buddhist history is taught in schools while other religions are completely absent from the teaching curriculum. Such religious domination in the education system is not only present in Myanmar. It is also in the countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, where certain Islamic religious education dominates the entire school curriculum.¹⁰⁹ In Kuwait, religious education in the form of

¹⁰⁸ Filus, “Interreligious Education in Japan,” 780.

¹⁰⁹ Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Models of Religious Education in the Muslim World: Current Developments and Debates on How to Teach Religion and Ethics in Public Schools,” in Engerbretson et al., *International Handbook*, 1038.

Quranic and Islamic classes is compulsory in all levels of public education.¹¹⁰ In addition, formal religious education curriculum, co-curriculum activities such as celebrating religious festivals and visiting religious places are utilized to preserve the values and practices of Islamic religion.¹¹¹

In Myanmar, most public schools begin classes with a Buddhist form of worship, morning meditation, reciting Buddhist dharma scriptures. Even though students from other religions are not required to attend the worship, all students have to learn the life cycle of Buddha and the history of Buddhism. Other religions like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism are not included in the curriculum which makes students of these religions feel left out and produces negative feelings toward Buddhism.

School curriculum on religious knowledge must be reconfigured to cover the general principles and history of each religion. The general idea for interreligious education in the school setting is to teach students to appreciate the importance of every religion and how it has influenced the country. The curriculum need not be doctrinal, but rather “with its social aspects, such as cultural differences in religiosity, knowledge of religious festivals, customs and observances, such as abstinence from certain foods and activities, ethical codes of behavior” so that students have a better understanding of how to coexist in a religiously pluralistic world.¹¹² Including religious curriculum in the school setting can also help the wider community appreciate the differences among religions and cultivate empathy in the community. In order to achieve having interreligious education in the school setting, people

¹¹⁰ Alanoud Alrashidi and Nawaf Alanezi, “Religious Socialization, Education, and the Perceptions of Heaven among First-Grade Muslim Children in Kuwait,” *Religious Education* 115, no. 5 (2020): 469.

¹¹¹ Alrashidi and Alanezi, “First-Grade Muslim Children in Kuwait,” 469.

¹¹² Filus, “Interreligious Education in Japan,” 780.

from many angles including “policy-makers, religious leaders, government officials and ordinary citizen” need to come together and these need to be people who have been taught to appreciate the diversity of religious belief and practice in their societies.¹¹³

Community

In the community setting, we can apply interreligious education in a deeper way, beyond providing general knowledge about different religions. Interreligious learning in the community is based on building relationships among people of different religions, which can happen only when people from these different communities appreciate the existence of the others and agree to work together to address the common issues that the communities face. It is important to develop “a deeply contextual, authentic, and grounded theology as well as sound reasoning for why interreligious learning is appropriate and necessary.”¹¹⁴ Opening doors for community members to see beyond religious traditions, rituals, and conversation is important to achieve meaningful interreligious engagement.

Building strong social bonds between different people in the community is vital for a peaceful society. As Larson and Shady state, “Diversity is not only inevitable but also desirable.”¹¹⁵ Embracing diversity is what should be done among different religious groups. Only by building meaningful relationships, can we eliminate false beliefs about others and learn from them. According to Larson and Shady, there are three mutually reinforcing dynamics that interact in building social bonds within a community: (1) community residents get to know each

¹¹³ Bouma, Ling, and Halahoff, “Impact of Religious Diversity,” 1062.

¹¹⁴ Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” 176.

¹¹⁵ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 29.

other as people, (2) social interactions help to develop social capital, and (3) through (1) and (2) develop, people learn about the beliefs and practices of their religious neighbors.¹¹⁶

There are many things we can do to practice interreligious education at the community level. For instance, women circles or women departments in churches, youth circles, interreligious education in church school and Dharma school, and attending festivals of other religions are some ways to practice interreligious education. Interreligious education at the community level can also include creative learning programs, such as yoga classes, physical exercise classes, group meditation sections, cooking classes, and community food sharing programs, where we can create an environment of effective dialogue, storytelling, listening, and good hospitality.

Kristin Johnston Lagen describes her experience of practicing yoga as something she does not only for physical exercise, but also as a spiritual practice. For her, the origin of yoga is Hinduism and originated as a spiritual practice.¹¹⁷ However, it is widely practiced throughout the world without explicitly being connected to a particular religious tradition. For Lagen, practicing *yoga* is an act of spiritual engagement. She relates it to the sacramental presence of Eucharist in the Lutheran tradition as “the body is a vehicle for realizing the divine.”¹¹⁸ *Yoga* can be used as a means to connect our bodies to the presence of the divine and practicing it with other community members is a way to create an interreligious learning environment by including discussion of the origins of yoga and how it has been practiced by different religious traditions.

¹¹⁶ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, 30, 31.

¹¹⁷ Kristen Johnston Lagen, “Our Interreligious Life in the Twenty-First-Century North American Context,” in Lagen, *Interreligious Learning and Teaching*, 10.

¹¹⁸ Lagen, “Our Interreligious Life,” 10.

Storytelling is another effective way to engage with interreligious dialogue. It is widely used in the work of Interfaith Youth Core as described in the “The Sacred Stories Project” by Eboo Patel, April Kunze, and Noah Silverman.¹¹⁹ Young people are the most important group when it comes to using interreligious education to create a better religious community. Dr. Frank Roger’s narrative pedagogy is an effective way of promoting learning, healing, and transformation within interreligious education by incorporating multi-religious and multi-cultural values. His pedagogy connects the narratives of our experiences with the “sacred spirit of life,” which can lead us to healing and transformation.¹²⁰ Here, narratives can be from personal human experiences and religious literatures (multi religious).

Social Activism

Social activism is by nature interreligious engagement. Therefore, social activism is one of the most important movements religious communities should participate in. It is the responsibility of every citizen to be a part of social movements against injustice. Many religious leaders in Myanmar have led protests and action against the military dictatorship. The Myanmar military regime again unlawfully took over the power from the elected government on February 1, 2021, and retained many political leaders including the State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi and the President, U Win Myint. People from all over the country started protesting against the military dictatorship and began a Civil Disobedience movement (CDM). Unfortunately, in the past, the church in Myanmar had been silent in the face of such an inhumane socio-political situation, especially the appalling military coup, because of its two basic theological grounds: the

¹¹⁹ Eboo Patel, April Kunze, and Noah Silverman, “Storytelling as a Key Methodology for Interfaith Youth Work,” in Mays, *Dialogue at the Grass Roots*, 35.

¹²⁰ Frank Rogers Jr., *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Stories* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2011), 130.

separation between church and state and the subjection of church to the state.¹²¹ The separation of church and state could work in the past, but in the 21st century, religion and state cannot be separated. They are closely and deeply interconnected.

During the 2021 February military coup, there have been some statements from Christian institutions against the coup. Many individual Christians and individuals from ethnic minorities are standing against the evil system by participating in the CDM. Some young people have initiated interreligious protesting movement and prayer program. However, most of Myanmar's churches are still submissive to the authority and do not stand up enough against the injustice. Myanmar theologian Pun Za Mang strongly states that the church must remain "a vital source of social movement for political freedom, social justice, ethnic equality, democratic regime, religious liberty, and just peace."¹²²

Social activism is supposed to be included in the education system, but the traditional education system in Myanmar deters students to social activism because it is designed to train students to simply obey authority. Interreligious education at the community level can weave together the practices of interreligious education and social activism. The whole community can come together for social justice and human right movements. There are many human concerns shared by every religion that can be a part of interreligious engagement including racial justice, religious rights, social movement for political freedom, and environmental movements.

Conclusion

For a successful and progressive interreligious education program in a complex and

¹²¹ Pum Za Mang, "Separation of Church and State: A Case Study of Myanmar," *Asia Journal of Theology* 25, no. 1 (2011): 43.

¹²² Mang, "Separation of Church and State," 56.

multi-religious community like Myanmar, educational methodologies and strategies must be revised to become relevant to our context. My next chapter is about religious pluralism and interreligious theology for interreligious education. In order to implement the methodologies and strategies for interreligious education in our society, understanding religious pluralism and interreligious theology is crucial. I argue that religious pluralism is the way to peaceful religious co-existence in this time of globalization. Interreligious education deals with religious diversity and to deal with religious diversity, we must develop interreligious theology for our own respective socio-religious context.

Chapter 5

Theological Reflections for Interreligious Education: Religious Pluralism and

Interreligious Theology

All is always undifferentiated in the Ocean of God, but also springs from “it” again as clouds, rain and rivers of spiritual life, ever expressing the unison of a manifold of which religions are only the events, drops, flows and waves.

– Roland Faber¹

Globalization had made the contemporary world religiously pluralistic, and this fact makes it ever more important to promote interreligious education and create an environment where every religion can co-exist in this pluralistic society. Religious pluralism is a response to the diversity of religious beliefs, practices, and traditions that exist in the contemporary world. Co-existence is inherent to pluralism, but unfortunately has still yet to be achieved in many places. For example, it is undeniable that Christians in all parts of the world live in religiously pluralistic societies, but conservative understanding of Christian doctrines has become a barrier to live peacefully in the pluralistic world. Religious co-existence is the new paradigm for religious pluralism.

This chapter will revisit theological positions called exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism which are the three popular positions for theology of religions. Based on interreligious theology and complementary religious pluralism, how to do theology in Myanmar context will be discussed in this chapter.

Exclusivism

Exclusivists believe that their religion is the only true religion; other religions of the

¹ Roland Faber, *The Ocean of God: On the Transreligious Future of Religions* (New York: Anthem Press, 2019), 199.

world are false. Paul Knitter put Exclusivism in two models: the total replacement model and the partial replacement model.² The total replacement model represents mostly in the theology of Karl Barth and is found in fundamental and evangelical churches. In Barth's *Church Dogmatic*, he set four things "alone" for the salvation of human beings: grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, and Scripture alone.³ The beliefs of all other religions excluded from these four things because, in Barth's view, salvation can be found only in Christianity. The partial replacement model professes that God can be revealed in other religions, but salvation is made known only by Jesus. This teaching was expressed in the World Council of Churches in their discussion of interfaith dialogue and religion. Both models of Exclusivism are belief systems in which a particular religion is believed to be the only true way to the Ultimate. It is a total rejection of other faiths when it comes to salvation.

Netland Harold uses the term "particularism" for Exclusivism. Particularism does not imply that there is no value in other religions. Each religion has something to learn from other religions. However, central to particularism, and particularly in the Christian context, is that God reveals himself definitively through His scriptures which state that Jesus Christ is the ultimate savior. As such, if one is to be saved, they must acknowledge Jesus and accept him.⁴ According to Hick, if this saving grace is possible only through Christ, then it means that salvation is restricted only to Christianity.⁵

² Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), chapters 1, 2.

³ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 24, 25.

⁴ Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 49.

⁵ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 32.

The central attitude of Exclusivism is religious superiority. This attitude has been prominent in Christianity throughout history. Both the Catholic and Protestant missionaries came to Burma with an exclusive attitude, proclaiming that Western nations possessed better and more advanced religions and cultures. Samuel Ngun Ling expresses that the Western missionaries "saw themselves and Christianity as superior to the Buddhists and Buddhism."⁶ This same exclusive attitude and feeling of superiority are instilled in the hearts of many Myanmar Christians, making genuine and open encounters with other religious traditions in the country extremely difficult. Even though the Myanmar Theologian Fellowship unanimously declared in 1997 that exclusivism is no longer applicable for doing theology and mission work in Myanmar,⁷ there are many Myanmar churches, including Baptists, that still hold exclusivist views of other religions. These churches use dialogue as a tool for their mission work to convert others to Christianity.

Inclusivism

Christian theological grounding for inclusivism is its Christology. For inclusivists, God's love is universal, but it is fulfilled only in Jesus Christ. Knitter uses the term "fulfillment model," which represents the voice of mainline churches including Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic churches.⁸ Inclusivism, according to Netland, is defined in terms of the following principles:

- (1) There is a sense in which Jesus Christ is unique, normative, or superior to other religious figures, and in some sense, it is through Christ that salvation is made available.
- (2) God's grace and salvation which are somehow based upon Jesus Christ, are also

⁶ Samuel Ngun Ling, *The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present, and Future Perspectives* (Yangon, Myanmar: Ling's Family Publication, 2017), 194.

⁷ Simon Pau Khan En, "Theological Issues in Dialogue," *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin* 6 (June 2006): 12-26.

⁸ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 63.

available and efficacious through other religions. (3) Thus other religions are generally to be regarded positively as part of God's purposes for humankind.⁹

The core of inclusivism is the desire to sustain the superiority of Jesus Christ and Christianity while also acknowledging that God's grace and salvation can be present in other religions. The Christo-centric theologians are willing to discuss dialogue and other religions, but ultimately they desire to come back to Jesus Christ and the church. Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and Pope John Paul II made "a more positive, a more dialogical, relationship of Christians with other believers" recognizing the richness of God's love and His Spirit in other religions, but that asserted that true fulfillment is found in Christ - that God has done something "extraordinary and special in Jesus the Christ."¹⁰ Karl Rahner proposed the inclusive term "*anonymous Christians*" for the people of other religions who would be saved through Christ even though they have not heard of him. In his view, people of other religions also experience the grace of God in their own religions and are already connected with and directed toward Jesus, because Jesus is the ultimate gift of God. Such a notion of inclusivism is not true inclusive because regardless what religion one belongs to, everyone finally becomes a member of one religion, which is Christianity.

John Hick criticized the inclusive position as "a brave attempt to attain an inclusivist position which is in principle universal but which does not thereby renounce the old exclusivist dogma."¹¹ According to Taras Dzyubanskyy, even though others are included in the inclusivist model, their "otherness" is not taken seriously and therefore, the uniqueness of others does not

⁹ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 51, 52.

¹⁰ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 86.

¹¹ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 33.

count.¹² Genuine interfaith dialogue is impossible in such a model because the uniqueness and differences of other religious traditions are not valued.

In Myanmar, Christo-centric theologians like Mary Dun believes the revelation of Christ is unique and needs to be shared with non-Christians. Mary Dun expresses her agreement with the concept of universal salvation through Christ. She supports the perspective of creaturely relatedness so that every person is a child of God and that every religion should be treated with respect and appreciation.¹³ Meanwhile, she believes that God's grace in Jesus Christ is not only for Christians, but for all people and so she urges Christians to value and to be faithful to Christ through witnessing the good news about Christ through dialogue both in words and action.¹⁴ This model of inclusivism definitely does not work for a genuine interreligious dialogue and is not an ideal for interreligious peacebuilding because the final destination to become a member of a particular religion.

Religious Pluralism

Both exclusivism and inclusivism misinterpret religious plurality based on their own confessions, creating divisions and religious conflict in the multi-religious society. In both positions, there is a belief that everyone must become a member of one true faith. Both exclusivism and inclusivism have a superior complex of their own religions which is incompatible with interreligious dialogue. Marianne Moyaert states that “both exclusivism and inclusivism have a hierarchical interpretation of religious plurality” such that “a true dialogical

¹² Taras Dzyubansky, “Interfaith Leadership and Typologies of Religious Plurality,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 30 (August 2020): 74.

¹³ Mary Dun, “Biblical Foundation for Interfaith Dialogue,” *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin* 6 (June 2006): 31.

¹⁴ Mary Dun, “Models of Dialogue,” in *Pyisgan Atway Myar* (Yangon: Alin Ein Literature Group, 2001), 104.

openness is impossible.”¹⁵ Both exclusivism and inclusivism are still actively present in many protestant and evangelical churches in Myanmar. Pluralism is the only position that seeks to combine both validity and religious differences since it does not consider religious diversity as an evil thing.¹⁶ Pluralism has challenged Christians today to reinterpret the traditional and exclusive understanding of Christian theology, moving toward a more liberal and open way of thinking about and understanding the text.

Given exclusivism can never result in peaceful coexistence within a multi-religious society, many theologians shifted their theological stance to some form of inclusivism. However, even inclusivism is unable to truly build peace among religious diversity, causing many theologians such as John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Paul Knitter, Peter Phan, and others to advocate the acceptance of pluralism. Pluralism is the most “democratic approach to interfaith dialogue.”¹⁷

Diana Eck defines pluralism in four points.¹⁸ First, “pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity.”¹⁹ Today, religious diversity is a given. Religious diversity without genuine encounters and relationships will generate religious tensions in our societies. Therefore, religious pluralism must be mutual engagement among religious diversity. Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, rather, it is the active seeking of understanding across

¹⁵ Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 82, 83.

¹⁶ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 1.

¹⁷ Dzyubanskyy, “Interfaith Leadership,” 74.

¹⁸ Diana L. Eck, “What is Pluralism?,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, 12/03/2020, <https://pluralism.org/about>.

¹⁹ Eck, “What is Pluralism?”

lines of difference.²⁰ As explained in the previous chapter, tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but religious pluralism must go beyond religious tolerance. Tolerance cannot remove our ignorance of one another, our stereotypes of our own and other religions, and the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly. Therefore, religious pluralism must move from religious tolerance into mutual appreciation of other religious traditions. Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments.²¹ For Eck, the new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind. It means while holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, while at the same time being open to, and building deep relationships with, people from other religions. Fourth, “pluralism is based on dialogue.”²² The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism, and self-critics. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, a process that reveals both common understanding and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the “table” will agree with one another.²³ Eck said that pluralists acknowledge and accept the limitation of our knowledge about God and the world we already know and therefore seek to understand people of other traditions from their own perspectives.²⁴

Pluralism asserts that salvation does not come only from one religion, but instead that all religious traditions are valid ways to salvation. Pluralists do not speak with one voice, but use a variety of approaches including "philosophical, mystical, and ethical approaches to describe the

²⁰ Eck, “What is Pluralism?”

²¹ Eck, “What is Pluralism?”

²² Eck, “What is Pluralism?”

²³ Eck, “What is Pluralism?”

²⁴ Eck, “Is Our God Listening?,” 23.

encounters of religions."²⁵ Religious pluralism affirms "universal openness and inward appropriation of other traditions," an attitude that was rare throughout the history of religion.²⁶ According to Roland Faber, it is not until we accept the pluralistic position that we will be able to communicate the truth between religions in a meaningful way.²⁷ As Moyaert states, "pluralism claims to be the best model for understanding the plurality of religions."²⁸

Understanding religious pluralism is the key to building genuine interreligious education because interreligious education has to deal with religious diversity. Taking a stance of religious pluralism is critical for interreligious education is because pluralism accepts the limitations of human understanding about the divine and the world, enabling people humble and accept and respect differences. There are multiple ways different pluralists express religious pluralism, some of which will be discussed in the next few sections.

John Hick

John Hick's pluralism is monocentric pluralism which suggests that there is only one ultimate reality to which all the major religions are related. As such, they can orient the lives of their adherents in different, though equally valid, and efficient ways toward this reality.²⁹ He argues that each of the world's religions has its own road to the truth. He states in *Problems of Religious Pluralism* that there is no single way of salvation or liberation but instead a plethora of

²⁵ Kwok, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding*, 24, 25.

²⁶ John B. Cobb Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 60.

²⁷ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 31.

²⁸ Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 85.

²⁹ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 8.

ways, pluralism.³⁰ Christianity is not the only religion that leads to the one ultimate reality; all other world Religions can be graded based on their soteriological efficacy.

Hick's pluralism is based on "the actual transformation of human life from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness" which is not restricted to one historical tradition.³¹ The pluralistic thought Hick suggests lies at the heart of his hypothesis involves two major concepts of the same Ultimate or "the Real": "One is the concept of Deity, or God, i.e. the Real as personal; and the other is the concept of the Absolute, i.e. the Real as non-personal."³² The Real as personal is known as God the Father in Christianity; as Adonai in Judaism; as Allah, the Quranic Revealer, in Islam; as Shiva or Vishnu or Paramatma and other images of deity in Indian religions. In the pluralist view, divine personae are "not rival gods, or rival claimants to be the one and only God, but rather two different concrete historical personae in terms of which the ultimate divine Reality is present and responded to by different large historical communities within different strands of the human story."³³ Divine persona is "concrete, implicitly finite, sometimes visual and even capable of being pictured."³⁴ The Real as non-personal is the "infinite being-consciousness-bliss of Brahman."³⁵ The evidence that a range of embodiments of the one Ultimate Reality is involved in the non-theistic forms of religious experience, rather than

³⁰ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 34.

³¹ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 32.

³² Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 41.

³³ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 42.

³⁴ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 43.

³⁵ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 43.

the direct unmediated awareness of Reality itself, consists precisely in the differences between the experiences reported within the different traditions.³⁶

Some doctrines of Christianity such as the incarnation, virgin birth, and predestination are problematic for religious pluralism. For Hick, these complicated doctrines should be taken and understood as "a symbolic or metaphorical or mythic rather than as a literal truth,"³⁷ as he says that "the religious life is lived largely in terms of symbol and myth."³⁸ Like John Hick, Paul Knitter supports the idea of having one "Ultimate divine mystery" or "the Real" for all religions which goes beyond all symbols. God is one, but the symbols by which God is perceived and expressed will be many in both personal and non-personal forms. Depending on the human experience of the Ultimate, the symbols or the pointers are different. Knitter says that calling Jesus Christ God or the son of God is a symbolic or mythological statement and therefore, that should not be taken as literal fact. Knitter says everything that talks about God, including Jesus Christ and Buddha, is to be taken as a metaphor or a finger pointing to Mystery.³⁹

John B. Cobb Jr.

All pluralists agree that there are multiple ways to salvation and appreciate those different ways religions possess to reach the Ultimate reality. They also reject the absolutism of any one religion. As John B. Cobb Jr. says, "Christian pluralists do not question the truth and saving value to be found in Christianity, but they see no reason to suppose that Christianity is the only path to truth and salvation. Instead, they believe that there are multiple ways of attaining

³⁶ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 43.

³⁷ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 11.

³⁸ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 14.

³⁹ Knitter, *Without Buddha*, 103.

salvation, and they often use the image of many paths up the same mountain."⁴⁰ The pluralism of John Hick and Paul Knitter can be more relevant for Theo-centric religions.

Cobb disagrees with the monocentric view of pluralism, which supposes that all traditions are different parts of the same Ultimate reality because anticipating this can lead to a failure to achieve mutual respect among religions.⁴¹ Mark Heim makes a similar argument, saying there are not just different means but also different ends for different religions.⁴² However, Heim believes these different goals are the pluralities of the same God, a view which Cobb is decidedly against, especially Hick's suggestion of God as personal and impersonal. For Cobb, it is not illuminating to say that "God, who is worshipped and Emptiness, which is realized, are two names for the same noumenal reality."⁴³

Cobb opposes the kind of Christian pluralism that fails to appreciate the depth of differences among the traditions. Instead, he emphasizes, ultimate reality must in itself be unimaginably complex on a metaphysical level that involves a plurality of ultimates which are "a personal deity or supreme being to which personal representations of the ultimate refer, impersonal creativity to which impersonal representation refers, and the universe itself understood as the totality of all finite beings, to which nature-centered religious tradition refer."⁴⁴ Cobb's pluralism is identified as a "deep pluralism" or "complementary pluralism."

⁴⁰ John B. Cobb Jr. "Rethinking Christian Faith in the Context of Religious Diversity," in *The Dialogue Comes of Age: Christian Encounters with Other Traditions*, ed. John B. Cobb Jr. and Ward M. McAfee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 20.

⁴¹ John B. Cobb Jr., *Jesus' Abba: The God Who Has Not Failed* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 113.

⁴² S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 16.

⁴³ David Ray Griffin, "John Cobb's Whiteheadian Complementary Pluralism," in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 46.

⁴⁴ Griffin, "John Cobb's Pluralism," 46.

Complementary pluralism is his solution for reconciling Christians theism, Buddhist non-theism, and non-theistic naturalism. It is systematically laid out based on Whitehead's philosophy. Cobb believes that there are three distinct religious ultimates: God, Creativity/Emptiness/ Nothingness/ Being-itself, and the cosmos/universe or the world of creatures.⁴⁵ These ultimates are present in every religion in some form, but different religions tend to stress or focus on one ultimate over the others. Viewed in this way, different religions are complementing each other by providing different insights and ways of understanding and approaching the ultimates. So, Cobb's pluralism avoids criticism of conflating religions that are very different from each other, for instance, Buddhist non-theism and Christian theism.⁴⁶

Cobb's goal of religious pluralism does not ignore differences. In his complementary pluralism, the concept of God in Christianity and the denial of God in Buddhism are not necessarily contradictory, but in fact they complement each other in interfaith dialogue. As a Christian, the affirmation of his belief in Abba the Father is never felt as "an attack upon the deep truths of other wisdom traditions."⁴⁷ For Cobb, "a true pluralism requires that each community describe itself in its way."⁴⁸

Roland Faber

In *The Ocean of God*, Roland Faber conveys the Baha'i contribution to the world of religious pluralism. For Faber, the aim of religious pluralism to stop violence and create a peaceful society by uniting in harmony under the "one" humanity. According to Faber, there was

⁴⁵ Griffin, "John Cobb's Pluralism," 45.

⁴⁶ Griffin, "John Cobb's Pluralism," 49.

⁴⁷ Cobb, *Jesus' Abba*, 114.

⁴⁸ Cobb, *Jesus' Abba*, 115.

a great paradigm shift within religion from the first axial age to the second axial age. The understanding of religion has shifted from existentialism during the first axial age to the new paradigm called religious pluralism in which the keyword is "connectivity".⁴⁹ Faber stresses that "new axial events are not primarily a religious phenomenon, but a shift in human consciousness, in general, that is not only of a similar global impact that the first axial age had facilitated but that, especially at a time of global connectivity today, represents a new level of interconnectedness."⁵⁰ Everything in the universe is deeply interconnected. Thus, Faber calls for the unification of religious worldviews, which is proclaimed by Baha'i religion as "the mutual relatedness of humanity and its religious existence in the context of one world-conscience and responsibility."⁵¹ Faber further points out that in this new overarching paradigm shift, all religions will have the same destiny; that is, "to reconnect humanity with the Earth in a trans religious ecological community."⁵²

Is it possible for every religion, with all their differences, to come together in unity? Unity and differences are not contradictory. As Faber says, "diversity is not just a matter of a lack of unity," but differences provide "humanity with the wealth of religious life and insight as well as underscore the deep valuation of the unfathomable divine mystery emanating into these differences."⁵³ Unity is not synonymous with uniformity which is a "misguided dream of the

⁴⁹ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 18.

⁵⁰ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 18.

⁵¹ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 16.

⁵² Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 19.

⁵³ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 25.

oneness of only one religion or the assumption of the sameness of all religions without recognition of the vast differences.”⁵⁴

Faber stresses on three motifs of the Baha'i religion. The first one declares that “all religions are emanating from the same divine or ultimate source” and “they are manifestations, revelations, self-communications of Reality itself.”⁵⁵ The second motif refers to the “universal characteristics of all religions to transform the character of humanity in a world moved by spiritual evolution.”⁵⁶ And the third motif is “the common aims of religions, such as the education of humanity toward peace and harmony; the realization of all divine attributes and virtues, especially love and compassion, justice and equality; and the salvation from the human propensity to follow all kinds of disrupting and often violent limitations, such as appear in the tendency to take recourse to lower, narrower or more egocentric goods instead of aspiring to the Good of all humanity and the world as a whole.”⁵⁷ “Hence, we must accept these differences as foundational for any unity of religions.”⁵⁸

Based on Baha'i teaching, Faber concludes that differences are “the highest level of religious origination in the divine Reality itself,” and that “religious differences are embodiments of space and time, mirroring the diversification of geography and climate, and allow for processes of becoming beyond any given state of affairs, spiritually and socially.”⁵⁹ Therefore,

⁵⁴ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 29.

⁵⁵ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 21.

⁵⁶ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 22.

⁵⁷ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 22.

⁵⁸ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 25.

⁵⁹ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 25, 26.

differences must be accepted in order for religions to unite to build a peaceful and harmonious society amidst religious diversity. Faber points out five obstacles that hinder the unity of religions: superiority, supersession, finality, denigration, and substitution.⁶⁰ To overcome these obstacles, he says superiority must be replaced with equality, supersession with remembrance, finality with evolution, denigration with appreciation, and substitution with integration.⁶¹

Baha'i teachings oppose John Hick's proposition of religious pluralism. Faber objects to Hick's proposal of the ultimate Reality as personal and impersonal God because the Reality is beyond both the personal and impersonal, meaning the Reality is by nature "transpersonal."⁶² All religions may not accept Reality as a personal or impersonal God, but they all harbor equally valid truth.⁶³ Since the Reality is beyond "any kind of utterance and expressible conceptual limitation," every religion is limited in the conceptualization of their Reality.⁶⁴

According to process thought, religious pluralism endorses "togetherness" in which nothing is considered completely independent or unbridgeable. It is always on the move toward becoming "new realities, impermanent unifications," "ever-new combinations, histories, constructions, deconstructions, and recoveries of lost voices."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 27, 28.

⁶¹ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 28.

⁶² Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 36.

⁶³ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 35.

⁶⁴ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 36.

⁶⁵ Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 84.

Peter Phan

Peter Phan is a Vietnamese Catholic theologian who has contributed ways of contextualizing theology for Asian countries. Asia is composed of 49 countries with great diversity across its regions concerning race, ethnicity, language, culture, politics, economics, and religions. It is the birthplace of many religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and other primitive religions. Therefore, Phan says that "the first requisite of God-talk in Asia is that it must be pluralistic" as the God that Asian people understand is not "monochromatic."⁶⁶ There are genuine and irreconcilable differences in the goals and aims of Christianity and Asian religions. Without the positive appreciation of Asian cultural, moral, and religious values, Christians cannot effectively speak to Asians about God.

Phan argues that creation itself is regarded as a gift of pluralism from God.⁶⁷ Thus, creation reflects and symbolizes the divine plurality and multiplicity. Therefore, he urges Christian churches to engage with other religions in the spirit of dialogue. Along with Vladimir Latinovic and Gerard Mannion, Phan suggested that "a deep intellectual and spiritual humanity" is needed for true religious pluralism, this being marked by diversity and an openness to hear truth claims that differ or even conflict with one's own. Having a deep intellectual and spiritual humanity means recognizing gratefully and gracefully that one's religion offers a true insight but not the whole truth and that other religions and their faith communities can also correct and complement each other.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, chapter 7.

⁶⁷ Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, chapter 7.

⁶⁸ Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, chapter 7.

Based on the teachings of Asian religions, Phan talks about God as the God of universal and cosmic harmony. He says, harmony is an "Asian spirituality," which relates to the "Ultimate and the Transcendent, in which all the four dimensions of human existence are involved with one another: the person, the person's relationships with his or her fellow human beings, the material universe, and God."⁶⁹ Phan used the metaphor of God in three divine persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He states that "divine unity does not consist in one *nature* or *substance* but the unity of the eternal threefold relations."⁷⁰ Therefore, to talk about God in Asia, the church must bring communion between Christianity and different Asian religions "without homogenizing their distinctive doctrines and practices."⁷¹ For Phan, "contextual theology" with a spirit of "deep solidarity with the context and of an open appreciation of the rich religious and cultural traditions of Asia" is the key to discussing the theology of a God of universal and cosmic harmony in a pluralistic society. Phan argues that theology should embrace intellectual, interpersonal, and cross-cultural elements, balanced by the commitment to social justice and the liberation of the minorities and the poor.

Interreligious Theology

Throughout history, the church in Myanmar has lived within linear thinking or in-box thinking which opposes change even while the world around them is changing. The church must change from the in-box thinking or church-centered thinking to relational thinking about the

⁶⁹ Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, chapter 7.

⁷⁰ Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, chapter 7.

⁷¹ Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, chapter 7.

entire community.⁷² The Christian theology that was taught by Western missionaries needs to be revisited and transformed so it is relevant for the contemporary, religiously pluralistic world.

Interreligious theology is what religious pluralists and progressive theologians look for to construct relevant theology within a pluralistic society. Interreligious theology reduces religious conflicts and emphasizes "the truth-seeking dimension of interfaith dialogue."⁷³ Interreligious theology is "a valid alternative against skepticism, fundamentalism" as it responds to every society in the world that is undergoing a widespread religious diversity.⁷⁴ It is a "type of doing theology which reflects on the major issues of human life by drawing on insights from more than one religious tradition."⁷⁵ Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan talk about the theology of multitude in their book *Occupy Religion*. In their view, *the multitude* is understood as "a political subject with social consciousness that has the power to shape its destiny and change the world" as well "the political object in the making" that is shaped by explicit "practices and concrete actions."⁷⁶ They say that the theological nature of "life-and-death" struggles has often been forgotten.⁷⁷ For instance, global warming and the environmental crisis must be a concern for all religions. These environmental problems are not merely social in nature, but also theological. There are people who "maintain dominant power and who benefit the most" from the world- often considered to

⁷² Saw Hlaing Bwa, "Challenges of Doing Theology in Myanmar," *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin* 6 (June 2013): 5.

⁷³ Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Peter C. Phan, "New Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue," in *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Peter C. Phan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 7.

⁷⁴ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 1.

⁷⁵ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 1.

⁷⁶ Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 29.

⁷⁷ Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 52.

be “God’s place” ignoring the many underprivileged people in the world.⁷⁸ Theology of the multitude includes advocating and actively working for the rights of the oppressed and marginalized including the suffering earth. Actions to address these issues must come from all human beings regardless of race and religion. The significance of the term “multitude” stands out for me because it allows “for and welcomes differences among various members”⁷⁹ and it is all about “relationship.”⁸⁰ Therefore, we can relate this to the term *interreligious theology*, which deals with “interreligious reflection on different understandings of religious diversity and their possible compatibility.”⁸¹ And this can be done only when religious pluralism is well accepted.⁸²

Religious pluralism "invites and encourages theologians from all religious traditions to explore the possible compatibility of their different and often apparently irreconcilable beliefs and orientations in life" in the form of dialogical exchange that is interreligious theology.⁸³ Doing interreligious theology requires grounding principles because it is not always an easy task. Schmidt-Leukel proposes four key principles. The first principle is "theological credit of trust" which means that interreligious theology is based on “the benefit of the doubt,” with each person in the dialogue having theological confidence and mutual trust in the other.⁸⁴ This can be possible only when one believes that the revelation of the Reality is not limited to a particular

⁷⁸ Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 51.

⁷⁹ Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 53.

⁸⁰ Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 55.

⁸¹ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 1.

⁸² Faber, *The Ocean of God*, 40.

⁸³ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 8.

⁸⁴ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

religious tradition, but is found in other religions. The second principle is "the unity of Reality," which is based on the idea that religious doctrines are not confined to one particular religion, but vary from one another and are often irreconcilable. As Schmidt-Leukel says, these differences and contradictory beliefs among different religions, actually complement each other and lead to mutual transformation. This is "what makes interreligious theology attractive and theologically significant."⁸⁵ The third principle is "tied to interreligious discourse." Schmidt-Leukel affirms that "any contribution to interreligious theology should be made in the implicit or explicit expectation of receiving also a response from other faiths" and involve the "interleaving of bilateral and multilateral theological discourses."⁸⁶ The last principle is "open access" by which Schmidt-Leukel means that interreligious theology is not "a specific subject area of theology," but has to be in the ongoing process of developing future theology in whatever religion.⁸⁷

Schmidt-Leukel also provides four methodologies for interreligious theology: (1) *Perspectival: Facing the confessional dimension*. Interreligious theologians must be aware that religious beliefs are not just "expressions of intellectual convictions but also of confessional commitments" and therefore they should never neglect every religious confessional stance while doing interreligious theology.⁸⁸ (2) *Imaginative: Seeing through the eyes of the other*. The basic nature of interreligious theology is to interact with different religious traditions. Without putting oneself imaginatively into another person's religious experience, it is impossible to do interreligious theology. One must be willing to see another person's religious understanding

⁸⁵ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

⁸⁶ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

⁸⁷ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

⁸⁸ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

through their eyes. Schmidt-Leukel stresses that interreligious theology "is rather a way of looking at one's tradition through the eyes of another tradition and of helping others in their attempts to look at their tradition through our own eyes."⁸⁹ Myanmar theologians have been doing theology through the eyes of different ethnic groups in the country because the experience of one's context is always different from the other. (3) *Comparative: Seeking reciprocal illumination*. Interreligious theology hopes seeing through the eyes of others will allow for the mutual transformation of our self-understanding of other religious traditions. This is "the expectation that governs and guides its comparative investigations."⁹⁰ They are not just one-sided illumination but reciprocal. Schmidt-Leukel argues that changes in how we understand our religious traditions may contribute to a historical process in which these traditions themselves will change. Thus, interreligious theology is also "creative, constructive, or transformative."⁹¹ (4) *Constructive: Mutual transformation*. Interreligious theology hopes for mutual transformation constructively. However, depending on how theologians from different religions position themselves, interreligious theology will lead them to a better understanding of the ultimate reality. Here Schmidt-Leukel supports Wilfred Cantwell Smith's vision that the end of interreligious theology "is to give a new and better expression of faith, the faith of all of us."⁹²

Doing Theology in Myanmar

Doing theology in a multi-religious society like Myanmar has inter-cultural and inter-traditional challenges. While Myanmar is composed of mainly Buddhists but, it also home to

⁸⁹ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

⁹⁰ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

⁹¹ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

⁹² Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 9.

many different ethnic and religious groups with different cultures. Unlike the United States and Western countries, diversity in Myanmar is not the result of global movements of people as migrants and political refugees. Inherent diversity has always been a unique aspect of the country as it is for many Asian countries. Therefore, for Myanmar Christians, doing theology based on Western philosophies or Judeo and Greco-Christian platforms is not sufficient. Theology for Myanmar people must be reinterpreted and contextualized based on the socio-political and cultural setting they live in. According to Saw Hlaing Bwa,

Theology should be reinterpreted, re-rooted and refreshed alive from the perspective of the life and experience of the people in every turn of history and engaged in the religious thought as well as the struggle of the suffering people, to be a theology that empowers the people for full humanity.⁹³

Without religious pluralism, diversity will only create self-interest, self-defense, and conflicts among different religions. To accept religious pluralism has been a great challenge for Christians in Myanmar because accepting religious pluralism involves rejecting the Christian absolutism people have been taught to believe in. The Christian missionaries' negative approach to other religions, and particularly to Buddhism, had shaped Christian theology to promote the exclusion of other religions. According to Schmidt-Leukel, the loss of certainty that comes with pluralization causes many people, especially traditional Christians, to experience existential anxiety.⁹⁴ Thus, it is difficult for Myanmar Christians to accept religious pluralism.

Another reason for Myanmar Christians to resist accepting religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence with people of other religions, especially with Buddhists, is the military

⁹³ Saw Hlaing Bwa, "Doing Theology in Myanmar on the Way to Democracy," in *Theology Under the Bo Tree: Contextual Theologies in Myanmar*, ed. Samuel Ngun Ling (Yangon: Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2014), 1:379.

⁹⁴ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, chapter 1.

government's oppression of religious minorities. Clinging to their religious absolutism and their faith has been the tool for their survival under the oppressive government. Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) is one of the leading Baptist seminaries to introduce liberal theologies, religious pluralism, and peace education programs. Their aim is to not only reach out to Myanmar Christians but also to people from other religions. Saw Hlaing Bwa, Samuel Ngun Ling, and Simon Pau Khan En are some of the most influential Baptist theologians in Myanmar from MIT who represent religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue.⁹⁵ They all took important roles in the Myanmar Christian community to transform the conservative theologies, which are not relevant to the current situation and boldly introduce liberal theologies grounded in religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue.

With the leadership of trained theologians, Myanmar churches need intra-faith dialogue on basic Christian theologies. In this section I will focus on reconstructing traditional theology about God in both Christianity and Buddhism from the religious pluralism perspective. This is important because doctrine around God is one of the basic concepts that influence a religion. The way someone sees and thinks about God greatly effects on how they react toward other religions.

Understanding the God of Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar

Throughout the history of Israel in the Bible, God was portrayed as a creator who created everything out of nothing and who had the power to do anything he wanted. He always stayed above his creation and did everything in his own will. Human beings were not supposed to complain, but simply accept everything he did. Traditional Christians believed it was God who

⁹⁵ Saw Hlaing Bwa is a systematic professor at Myanmar Institute of Theology who took a brave role to introduce religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue in Myanmar. He is also a current director of Judson Research Center, MIT. Samuel Ngun Ling is the president and a theology professor at Myanmar Institute of Theology. He is a former director of the Judson Research Center, MIT. He was the one who started the Interfaith Dialogue Group at MIT. Simon Pau Khan En is a former president of Myanmar Institute of Theology and is currently a pastor for Chin Baptist church, Yangon. He was a prominent professor at MIT.

appointed some to be superior and some to be inferior, some to be leaders, and some to be followers, some to be masters and some to be slaves. God, in the traditional teaching of Greek philosophy, is the transcendent other-the other. In his being, he is perfect who requires nothing.⁹⁶ According to Cobb and Griffin, the classical notion of the concept of God is that God is a cosmic moralist, the unchanging and passionless absolute, controlling power, sanctioner of the status quo, and male.⁹⁷ This concept of God has been problematic for most contemporary Christians who live in a pluralistic society. Christianity, in the classical understanding of God, has a very exclusive God, saying that only those who believe in Jesus Christ will inherit the kingdom of God, and those who do not will be judged. This understanding of God is still rooted in most Myanmar churches.

The term *God* in Myanmar Buddhism is different from that of Christianity. It is complicated to converse about God with Myanmar Buddhists without understanding the concept of God in Buddhism because "there is no equivalent Burman Buddhist term for the Christian God."⁹⁸ In Burmese, God is called *Pha-yah* and this usage among Myanmar Buddhists is always ambiguous. There are two different levels for the term *Pha-yah*.⁹⁹ In the first level, *Pha-yah* is used for literal forms such as pagoda, images of Buddha, and monks which they worship and honor. This greatly differs from the Christian concept of God. The second level of *Pha-yah* is the "ultimate reality" beyond the visible objects of gods. According to Ngun Ling, this level is

⁹⁶ Knitter, *Without Buddha*, 3.

⁹⁷ John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 7-11.

⁹⁸ Samuel Ngun Ling, "Communicating God and Christ in Myanmar," in *Theology under the Bo Tree: Contextual Theologies in Myanmar*, ed. Samuel Ngun Ling (Yangon: Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2014), 1:288.

⁹⁹ Ling, "Communicating God and Christ," 288.

closer to the concept of the Christian God, but Buddhists believe in the non-personal form of God or ultimate reality which is contrary to Christian belief of God as a person, the eternal one, or creator. *Pha-yah* in the second level for Buddhists is higher than what is visible. It can mean the attainment of Buddhahood or the full enlightenment of Dharma. They believe that everyone can become that *Pha-yah* if one tries hard, meaning that even though Buddhists reject the concept of Christian God as the creator, "they believe that all human beings have in them the spirit of divinity."¹⁰⁰

There are two kinds of Buddhists' belief in Myanmar: the normative or traditional Buddhism known as Theravada Buddhism and the non-normative Buddhism which is mixed with the worship of gnats or spirit.¹⁰¹ Theravada Buddhism refuses to recognize Gautama Buddha as God, the Supreme Being. He was a human being who attained full enlightenment through meditation and showed his followers the path of spiritual awakening and freedom from suffering. For Theravada Buddhists, Buddhism is not a religion of God but, of wisdom, enlightenment, and compassion. This enlightened mind or Buddha-nature manifests itself in the experience of wisdom and compassion, something that is inherent in all people. For these Buddhists, practicing compassion and dharma is the most essential thing a person had to do to attain Buddhahood as it is believed to be "a way of life."¹⁰² Non-normative Buddhism, which is mixed with the worship of gnats and devas—lower and higher spirits—like to address the

¹⁰⁰ Mary Dun, "The Concept of God in Myanmar Context," in *Theology Under the Bo Tree: Contextual Theologies in Myanmar*, ed. Thomas Cung Bik (Yangon: Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2017), 2:27.

¹⁰¹ Dun, "Concept of God in Myanmar," 27.

¹⁰² Hla Myint, "Buddhism as a Philosophy of Life," *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin* 11 (December 2009): 74.

Buddha as God. They also like to express their belief that the nats and devas can save them in the time of crisis.

Myanmar Christians, first and foremost, need to change their traditional understanding of God to be able to accept religious pluralism. Ngun Ling holds the differences in how God is understood in traditional Christianity and Buddhism as a serious problem for communicating God in Myanmar.¹⁰³ Progressive theology like process theology opposes the classical notion of God, which makes human beings powerless, and proposes instead a relational concept of God which is not just limited in a particular religion. Cobb and Griffin support the idea of Whitehead and Hartshorne in saying that it is incoherent and inadequate to say that the absolute God is always eternal or perfect. Unlike traditional Christian belief, process theologians do not see God as impassive; he suffers like any other human being and his creation. God is not omniscient because, in his perfection, he cannot control future events. He does not control his creation because he loves it and one does not control someone they love. According to process theology, the relationship between God and the world is not a top-down and hierarchical system, but one grounded in creative love where everything is interrelated, not only between God and the world, but even among creation as a whole. The God of process theology is expressed in such a way that he is working together with all his creation; he is a God who suffers and journeys with his creation. According to Mesle, God's love is immeasurable and stays with his creation through the journey of life.¹⁰⁴ Understanding God from a relational and process perspective will help Christians to see other religions like Buddhism with welcoming eyes without judgment, which is the first step to openness. John Cobb's reference to "creativity" as another form of the ultimate

¹⁰³ Samuel Ngun Ling, "Communicating God and Christ," 1:296.

¹⁰⁴ Mesle, *Process Theology*, 78.

and John Hick's impersonal form of the Real are also helpful concept to reconcile the Christian concept of God with that of Buddhism. Christians should be brave and creatively imagine the experience of God in a formless and impersonal reality. This could be done in part by studying and encountering Buddhism. Such discussions and encounters must be brought to the religious dialogue table in order to achieve mutual understanding.

The differing concepts of God in Christianity and Buddhism may not be fully reconcilable, but they can complement each other to create a more complete sense of the divine. For instance, while Buddhists do good deeds and actions to increase their merit, Christians do it for the glorification of God. While Buddhists practice meditation to free themselves from their self-ego and the illusion of the worldly life, Christians pray as a petition directed to God. For Buddhists, there is no God in a personal form to fear but their actions will determine their future merit. But for Christians, God is the reason they practice good deeds. If one can see God from a perspective of process theology and complementary religious pluralism, these practices and beliefs do not necessarily become conflicting between the two religions, but instead, paint a fuller picture of God, which can enrich both Christians and Buddhists and help them grow in their spirituality.

Complementary Pluralism

Complementary pluralism is an important tool for doing theology in Myanmar. Some Myanmar theologians in the past have tried to contextualize the gospel in Burmese cultural forms such as presenting Biblical stories in Burmese drama and costumes and, composing gospel songs by using indigenous music and instruments. However, those were the old traditional messages which Western missionaries left and they were "passive, reactive or apologetic."¹⁰⁵ For Hlaing

¹⁰⁵ Bwa, "Contextualization of Theology," 2:16.

Bwa, "entering into core-to-core dialogue" with other religions is to develop relevant theology in the present pluralistic context.¹⁰⁶ Hlaing Bwa suggests the "Christian-Buddhist" model as a possible step for Christians in Myanmar to discern God's salvific work in other religions especially Buddhism through solidarity and the existential dialogue together. "Christian-Buddhist" means that Christians can expand their faith to include faith in the teaching of Buddha while still keeping their faith in Christ.¹⁰⁷ This was expressed earlier by Professor Khin Maung Din,¹⁰⁸ who challenged the traditional understanding of mission-evangelism to consider a new way of understanding evangelism that into account people's real-life situation, and who said "Buddhist-Christian" demands an existential decision.¹⁰⁹ Khin Maung Din points out that Buddhist do not need to give up their faith to become Christian because God's work cannot just be limited and narrowly confined only within Christianity.¹¹⁰ Here, the teachings of Christianity and Buddhism can complement each other in dialogue to seek God's reconciling love within the struggle of the people in Myanmar. In this model, dialogue through mutual sharing is the most essential. Hlaing Bwa stresses a form of dialogical evangelism that creates "the platform of Buddhist-Christian or Christian-Buddhist community in this process in the quest for the community of witness."¹¹¹ This is the founding idea of John Cobb's complementary pluralism:

¹⁰⁶ Bwa, "Contextualization of Theology," 2:16.

¹⁰⁷ Bwa, "Contextualization of Theology," 2:19.

¹⁰⁸ Professor Khin Maung Din was a philosopher-theologian of Burma during the socialist regime, who challenged the traditional Christian theologies in Burma.

¹⁰⁹ Bwa, "Contextualization of Theology," 2:19.

¹¹⁰ Bwa, "Contextualization of Theology," 2:19.

¹¹¹ Bwa, "Contextualization of Theology," 20.

that the teachings of Christianity and Buddhism should not become contradictory, but reconcile and complement each other.

The norm of religious pluralism is diversity. The mission of religious pluralism is to achieve mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation among different religions. As Faber's proposal of "connectivity," the differences between the religious beliefs of two religions should not prevent two religions from uniting. Rather the differences among religions show how they are interconnected and this connectivity brings unity and solidarity in spite of the differences. Jay McDaniel also talks about the heart of complementary pluralism which for him is "the assumption that there is more wisdom in all the religions taken together than in any of them considered alone, and that people of different religions have much to learn from each other because of insights from one religion help complete and correct insights from the others."¹¹² The differences between two religions can be used to enrich and enlighten the spirituality of both parties. Based on the fundamental idea of complementary pluralism and the unity between religions, bridging the gap between Christians and Buddhists is possible by establishing common grounds of public concern such as ecological issues, social justice, human rights, trauma and healing, civil society development, and capacity building for young people. All of these are critical areas of work for Myanmar in its current situation.

Interreligious Theology for Myanmar

As interreligious theology is doing theology with other religious traditions to explore differences in beliefs and common ground for the welfare of human society in a dialogical platform, Myanmar theologians must continue to develop interreligious theology with other traditions. Socio-religious and socio-ethnicity are the two important settings to consider while

¹¹² McDaniel, *Gandhi's Hope*, 9.

doing theology in Myanmar. The government must take care of religious conflicts in the country. Nevertheless, to achieve harmony, which is “Asian spirituality,”¹¹³ religious leaders need to also address religious conflicts. There have been ongoing socio-religious conflicts and violence in the country. For instance, religious conflicts exist in the Rakhine State between Muslims and Buddhists, something which has recently received international attention. Finding a solution to conflicts such as this by working together with a positive attitude and building interreligious theology is a common and essential task for religious leaders.

Moreover, peace and reconciliation issues in the country that relate directly with ethnic identity and, a yearning for equality and self-determination should not be ignored in the theological world. It is the painful experiences of ethnic minorities under the oppression of the Burmese military government which have led them to hate the Burmese ethnic group, which is the majority of the population. On the other hand, there are also many hidden bitter experiences of some ethnic groups under the oppression of their fellow ethnic armed group members who are more powerful than they are. Therefore, any theology religious leaders produce should be liberating from the oppression and suffering caused by the domination of religious and ethnic majorities, including social inequality, poverty, and spirituality. This can be done only through genuine dialogue, interreligious theology, and encouraging people to see the experiences and feelings of others from their shoes.

Dialogue and theological education are what MIT has been using in their effort into transforming Myanmar’s theological world. What they are doing is a kind of interreligious theology. Under the leadership of the Judson Research Center of MIT, interfaith dialogue has been an important part of the educational process to create a society where different religions can

¹¹³ Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, chapter 7.

coexist in peace and harmony. Hlaing Bwa states, “in the context of plurality, dialogue means all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding, mutual enrichment, and cooperation.”¹¹⁴

Samuel Ngun Ling writes that dialogical education includes “interactive learning and mutual sharing of different experiences, understandings, and concerns about God, humanity and the world.”¹¹⁵ Just as interreligious dialogue is an open process, it is also an ongoing process, one that will continue to develop future theology until there is peace and harmony in the pluralistic country.

Conclusion

Religious pluralism is the only alternative for today’s religiously pluralistic world to bring peace and solidarity to a pluralistic world. The aim of religious pluralism is religious coexistence through its mission to achieve mutual understanding, and peaceful cooperation among different religions. Interreligious theology with the model of complementary religious pluralism is what we need for different religions to co-exist in a pluralistic society. If all people were to embrace interreligious theology, it is possible to establish effective and efficient coexistence among all religions. As Peter Phan states, “In Asia to be religious is to be interreligious”; doing theology in a pluralistic society is doing interreligious theology.¹¹⁶

This dissertation emphasizes what Interreligious Religious Education can actually do for peacebuilding in a pluralistic society. IRE must bridge between knowledge and action in today’s emerging diverse society. Pluralistic societies like in Myanmar which is composed with different

¹¹⁴ Saw Hlaing Bwa, “Interreligious Dialogue,” *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin* 13 (August 2012): 97.

¹¹⁵ Ling, “Dialogue and Theological Education,” 2:2.

¹¹⁶ Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, chapter 7.

ethnic, religious, cultural, and social groups, minority groups of people struggle with issues pertaining to human rights, religious rights, self-determination, development, and dominant powers. As Shannon K. Frediani states, “IRE needs to consciously engage overcoming comparative racialization, or at the least, introduce the concept to get a grasp of the complexity of the work.”¹¹⁷

According to Eboo Patel, an interfaith leader is “someone with the vision, knowledge base, and skill set to nurture understanding and cooperation among people who orient around religion differently.”¹¹⁸ Taras Dzyubanskyy states that the work of religious leaders is a double-task: “to lead/serve their community and to have the skills necessary to build bridges with other religions.”¹¹⁹ Therefore, they need to be well-trained with the knowledge of their own religious tradition as well as with the skills to encounter with other religions. While interreligious leadership is a new concept for Myanmar, it still needs to be developed theologically and the outcome of this new leadership must be further studied and researched. Interreligious Education has the opportunity to respond the current situation in Myanmar by addressing traumatic cycle of the ongoing oppressive system and approaching healing the traumatic community. Creating interreligious encounter in such a way to bring trauma healing through the work of interreligious just peacemaking is a critical work to be developed.

¹¹⁷ Shannon K. Frediani, “Decolonizing Interreligious Education: Countering Systemic Injustice through Expanding the Interreligious Imaginary” (PhD diss., Claremont School of Theology, 2019), 136.

¹¹⁸ Eboo Patel, “Preparing Interfaith Leaders: Knowledge Base and Skill Set for Interfaith Leaders,” *New Directions for Student Leadership* 152 (Winter 2016): 77.

¹¹⁹ Dzyubanskyy, “Interfaith Leadership,” 78.

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